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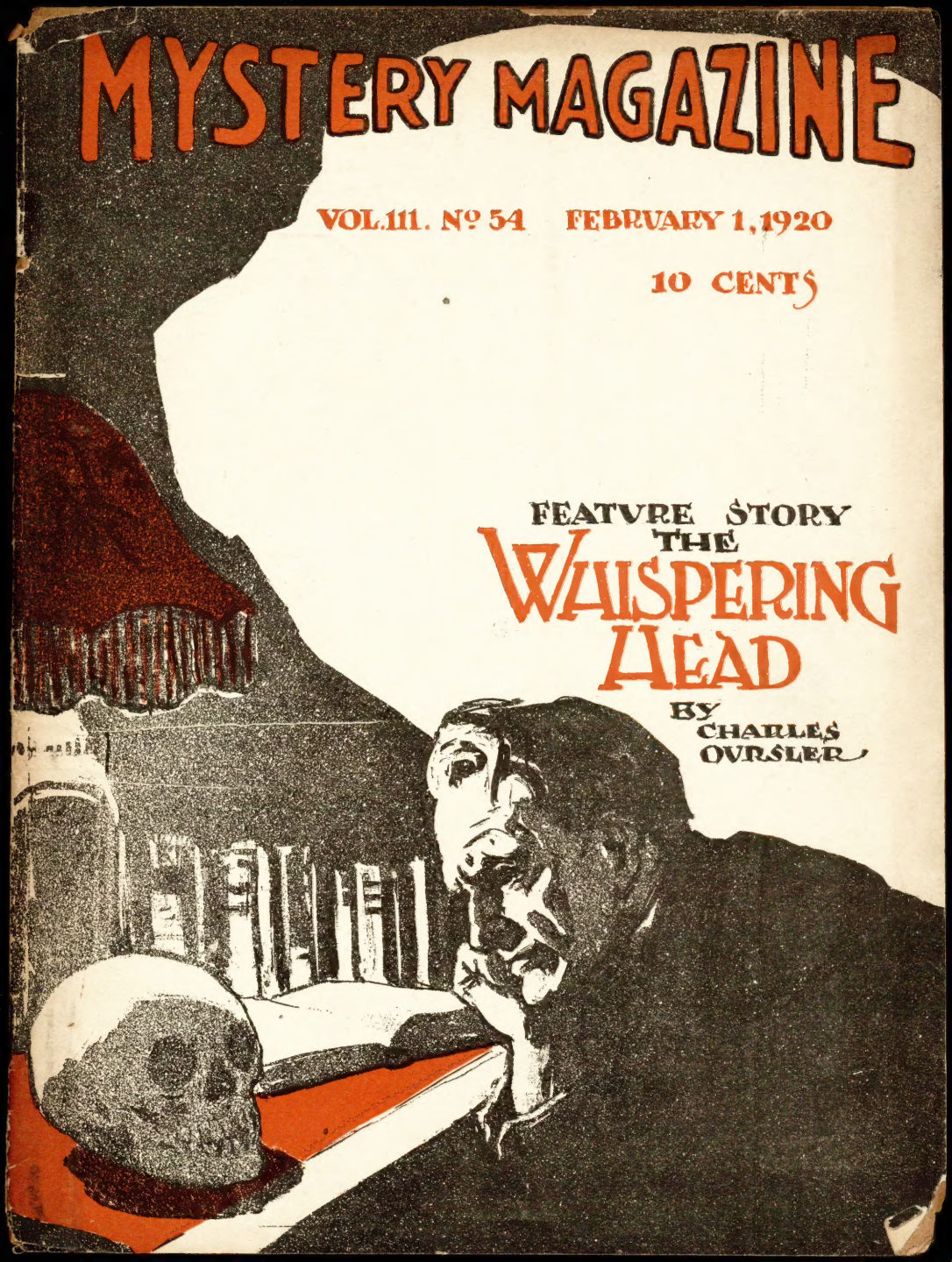
FEATURE STORY

THE WAISPERING HEAD

BY CHARLES OURSLER



DON'T MISS "THE INSPECTOR'S STRANGE CASE" By BEULAH POYNTER IN No. 55

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THE WHISPERING HEAD

A WEIRD DETECTIVE STORY

By CHARLES F. OURSLER

CHAPTER ONE

BROUGHT IN THE STORM

AMONG the inhabitants of the Dark Head peninsula on the Sound, the thirteenth of last November will be remembered when other nights of tempest have long been forgotten.

Within the library of Mystic Towers, however, all was serene and homelike. The trembling of the window panes, as the boughs swayed against them with a ghostly tapping, the occasional slamming of a shutter in the infuriated gusts, the swish of the swirling sleet, made the leaping flames of the fire-place log seem warmer and brighter. There was no other light in the room than the deep, dancing glow of the hearth-flames, and it was by the light of the log fire that the master of Mystic Towers sat reading.

He was a massive figure as he sat, silhouetted against the crackling fire, his finger tracing a difficult passage in the large book spread on his knees. A ruddy light played over his face, revealing the strongly chiseled countenance of a man of action, with the eyes of an idealist, and the forehead of one whose analytical powers might be developed to almost any height. His hair was prematurely and completely white, yet there was a boyishness in the expression into which his face was contracted now—the kind of look a schoolboy has, as he tries to get a difficult problem in algebra through his head, while his brain insists on speculating about the standing of the Yankees in the American League.

"Mistah Fox! Dey's somebody knockin' like de debbil at de do'!"

The man at the fireside pressed his finger even more firmly on the page which lay open before him and read on,

utterly ignoring the black apparition in a white coat who stood anxiously in the doorway. Evidently the negro knew better than to speak again, for he remained silent, until Imro Fox closed the book and set it reverently on the table near his hand.

"Nebuchadnezzar Noots!" he said severely, "how many times have I told you not to interrupt when you see me reading?"

The negro hung his head penitently.

"Fo' de Lawd, Mistah Fox," he pleaded humbly, "dey's somebody tryin' to get in at de do'! And jest lissen to dat wind and rain out dar! It's nearly one o'clock in de mawnin'!"

With a start, Imro Fox rose to his feet, his face expressing at once the keenest surprise and concern.

"I was too engrossed," he murmured, more to himself than to the servant. "Go down and let them in, Neb. It may be something very important. One o'clock in the morning—way out here in Dark Head—and in a storm like this!"

Filling an ancient calabash pipe with a fragrant mixture, he walked back to the fireside and deftly drew a sputtering splinter from the blaze. With this he proceeded to light his pipe and was thus engaged when Neb reappeared at the library door.

"Two gen'men to see you, suh," he said, his eyes rolling as he spoke. "Dey's wet as drownded cats, and one of 'em's gotta big bundle under his arm in a black rag. I don' lak nobody what carries such a thing under dey's arm in a night like dis!"

"Did they give any names?" demanded Imro Fox.

"Yas, suh! Dey gib me dis cahd!"

Imro Fox took the bit of pasteboard from the darkey's hand and examined it carefully. It bore the name of Barrington Thurd, and nothing else except an address on Wall Street. The name was dimly familiar to Imro Fox, but he did not recall ever having met Barrington Thurd.

"Show them up," he said, and Neb vanished through the doorway, to reappear a moment later ushering in the two visitors. Imro Fox had taken a position at the farther end of the fire-place; a post of vantage which threw his face into shadow, and which gave him the opportunity of seeing the features of his nocturnal callers in the full brilliance of the corridor lights.

The first man to cross the threshold was proclaimed by his manner and equally by his attire to be a person of considerable importance. He was a big man, with black mustaches that were long and drooped after the English fashion; his face was round and florid, and his eyes were small and gleamed bright as diamond points behind old-fashioned spectacles. He wore neither raincoat nor goloshes, and presented a rather sorry spectacle. Yet his manner was authoritative, not to say pompous, and he strode in as one who knew he would be welcome.

"Is this Mr. Imro Fox?" he blurted out.

Fox bowed and smiled, but his bow was perfunctory and his smile a puzzle.

"I must apologize for this intrusion at such an hour," rattled the big man imperiously, "but this is a matter that will not admit of—yes, Dr. Cleft, for God's sake come on in!"

He addressed himself to a hitherto invisible person in the hallway, who, at this urgent invitation, stepped into view. He was a tall, spare man, absolutely bald-headed, with a face so thin, with the skin so drawn across the big-boned features, that he had much the look of an animated mummy. His left arm was crooked at the elbow, hugging close to his ribs some round object, wrapped in a length of black velvet.

"Mr. Fox, this is Dr. Cleft—a friend—yes—er—of mine."

Imro Fox gravely acknowledged the introduction, and was about to ask them to be seated when the angular, bald-headed gentleman who had been introduced as Dr. Cleft, strode up to him and took his hand effusively. Dr. Cleft had a hand as cold and clammy as a fish, and Fox was glad when he was able to dislodge his own hand from the doctor's grip.

"My dear Professor Fox!" exclaimed Dr. Cleft in a flutter, "it is an honor to meet such a man as you. I have heard of your metaphysical researches. Believe me, sir, the scientific world owes you much. There! I see your book—we have interrupted your studies. What—Eliphas Levi's 'Transcendental Magic'? What a man! What a——"

"Cut it out!"

Barrington Thurd's voice was an indignant roar. He put a red hand on his friend's shoulder and thrust him down into a chair. Then he turned aggressively on Imro Fox, whose serenity had been in no wise disturbed by the proceedings.

"Mr. Fox, it has come to my knowledge, never mind how, that you are a sort of consultant to the detective force when they run up against a case that's one too many for them. Is that a fact?"

Imro Fox smiled a little cryptically, and then replied:

"What I am, or what I do, cannot so much matter under the immediate circumstances, Mr. Thurd. The fact is that you have come here, and it is for you to explain your business."

Barrington Thurd gulped and swallowed, and said he would get down to brass tacks without delay.

"The fact is that I am in trouble, and I am afraid something's going to happen," he said, a whine, which did not escape Imro Fox, creeping into his tone. "I don't want to go to the police about it, and yet I think——"

"You shouldn't have gone to anyone about it," snapped Dr. Cleft, fondling his black bundle and batting his eyes viciously. "It's purely a matter of the lower astral!"

"Shut up!" roared Thurd again. "Maybe you're right and maybe you're wrong, and I'm taking no chances. The point is, Mr. Fox, will you help me by your advice, so that it will not be necessary to incur the painful publicity of an appeal to the regular force?"

There was a moment of silence before Imro Fox's mellow voice was heard in answer.

"If you have a real, honest-to-God mystery on your hands," he said, "I'll take your case. If it is merely an every-day matter, I'll have nothing to do with it whatever. That is my invariable rule, not only with private callers, but with the police as well."

The big man exchanged glances with the solemn lean man who held the black bundle, and both smiled.

"You may decide that for yourself," said Dr. Cleft, with a confident wag of his bald head. "As for me, I have explained the problem already to my——"

Thurd interrupted with a snort and a glance that should have annihilated Dr. Cleft, but apparently made no impression whatever. Imro Fox, meanwhile, had pushed a chair forward, into which Thurd flung himself, while Fox resumed his place at the fireside, facing his two visitors.

"Before we go any further," said Barrington Thurd pompously, "let me say that you will be paid just as handsomely for this as if you were working for the Sultan of the golden isles. That's the way Barrington Thurd does things. Your check will be——"

"Before we go any further," broke in Imro Fox, for the first time a little choler rasping his usually musical, even tones, "understand that I do not take money for my ser-

vices. There are plenty of competent private operatives for hire, if that is what you are seeking. Understand that I work under my own conditions, and only on such cases as please me."

A glint of satisfaction shone in Thurd's eyes, as he put up a menacing hand to silence the protest that was about to leap from the lips of the shocked Dr. Cleft.

"Of course," purred Barrington Thurd, "it shall be as you wish. I hope I have not offended you, Mr. Fox."

"Tell me what you have come to see me about," returned the detective, as he slouched far back in his easy chair and closed his eyes. "You must surely have a good reason for coming here, in such a storm, and at such an hour."

Barrington Thurd gave a quick glance at the bundle under the arm of his companion, and his face paled visibly.

"We have the best of reasons," he said shakily, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper. "I will come to the point at once, Mr. Fox, for I see that you are getting impatient. It has all happened in the last twenty-four hours. I have a home in Larchmont, where I live with my daughter and a maiden sister, who is my only surviving relative. Just now we are entertaining a number of guests—among whom is Dr. Cleft. Last night I—please don't laugh, Mr. Fox, I assure you that all that I shall tell you is absolutely true—I retired rather early, as I had not been feeling particularly well since dinner. I dropped off into a doze and awoke in a strange, unusual kind of daze. It was the first time I have ever felt such a sensation before. There seemed a kind of buzzing in my ears at first, and then, as this gradually cleared away, I could hear something else. It was a voice, at my ear—and speaking in a whisper.

"At first, Mr. Fox, I could not make out what it was saying, and I was so weary in my arms and legs that I did not feel like moving. I simply lay there, wondering in a dull sort of way who it was who had come up to tell me something. But then I gradually got the hang of what was being whispered and repeated in whispers over and over again in my ear. The voice was murmuring—'I come to you, on your chest, to-night, and I shall stay with you until the woeful end. I am the Inescapable!'"

Thurd paused a moment, to wipe away the beads of cold sweat that had gathered on his lined and wrinkled forehead.

"You can't understand," he resumed, "how difficult it was for me to get all that at first. But whoever it was kept repeating it, slowly and distinctly over and over again, until at last I got it all clearly, and the damnable thing now sings in my ears like some old hag's tune. Just as soon as I realized the fool purport of the thing I shook myself free of the lethargy into which I had fallen and raised myself on my elbow. Mr. Fox, will you believe me when I tell you there wasn't a soul in that room?"

Imro Fox remained with eyes closed, and returned no answer. Dr. Cleft muttered something, known only to himself, and Thurd continued:

"Mr. Fox, you may believe me or not, I searched that bedroom high and low, and when I say I searched it, I mean I searched it. The door was locked, and there wasn't a chance for anybody to get out of the window. I looked everywhere and I couldn't find a soul!"

Barrington Thurd gulped, and grew paler and actually shuddered as he glanced now at the solemn Dr. Cleft.

"It seems so weird, so uncanny—so impossible!" he said, his voice husky and frightened. "I searched half the night—then I got back to bed, half convinced that I had dreamed it all. It was almost dawn before I went to sleep. But I did get to sleep at last, and I slept—for just ten minutes. I remember seeing the clock hands pointing at six o'clock—and it was but ten minutes after six when I woke again. And then——"

"That was sitting on my chest!" he cried, pointing a thick, trembling finger at the black-wrapped bundle under Dr. Cleft's arm. The doctor tore away the covering and set the thing upon the table, where in the strange red glow of the firelight flames and the shadows that they cast around it, it grinned, a grim and sinister object.

It was the skull of a human head.

CHAPTER TWO

IMRO FOX MAKES AN EXPERIMENT

"IS that all that happened?" asked Imro Fox, after one casual glance at the death's head on the library table.

Barrington Thurd and his friend, Dr. Cleft, gazed at each other in astonishment. They had expected the investigator to sit up amazed at the tale related, yet there sat the scientist who devoted his leisure to the detection of criminal mysteries, apparently unmoved at the strange recital. It was inconceivable!

"Isn't that enough?" faltered Dr. Cleft, in an offended tone.

"By no means," returned the investigator in calm, even tones. "It is a very ordinary problem. A ventriloquist might have made the whisper appear to sound at your ear. Or a concealed miniature phonograph might have accomplished the same result. The fact that the same two sentences were repeated over and over again adds the color of probability to the second theory. Or the identical effect might have been produced by a novel application of the wireless telephone, as used by the late Dr. Saram R. Ellison. There are a dozen ways in which the thing might have been done."

Thurd appeared about to burst with indignation.

"That was not all," he thundered, bringing his thick, red fist down with an emphatic bang on the arm of his chair. "The most hellish part of the whole business is yet to be told."

"That's better," murmured Fox, and he settled back into a more comfortable position. "Do go on."

Barrington Thurd cleared his throat, and resumed:

"You will understand there was no sleeping after I had awakened to find that infernal skull on my chest. I could barely refrain from pitching it out of the window, but I did not consider that the wisest thing to do. I sat down on the side of the bed, after placing my head on my bureau, and tried to figure the problem out. Of course, I would say nothing either to my sister or my daughter; they are both afflicted with nerves and all that sort of thing. But I must confide in some one. And like an inspiration I was suddenly reminded of Dr. Cleft, at that moment a guest at my house, and a man with a reputation as a psychic. Perhaps he could unravel the mystery.

"Believe me, I did not stand upon ceremony. Summoning one of my servants, I sent a message to Dr. Cleft, and he was kind enough to come at once. Naturally, he was taken aback at the thing he saw reposing on my bureau. I told him rapidly what had transpired, and was barely finished when an incredible, an unbelievable, an absolutely appalling thing, occurred."

Here the financier paused to gather new breath and courage.

"Well, what was it?" demanded Fox testily.

"The skull began to laugh!" gasped Thurd.

"To giggle—to titter—to simper and cackle," put in the solemn Dr. Cleft, making a grimace.

"It laughed like a fiend; its jaws creaked, and its teeth chattered and rattled," supplemented Thurd, in an awesome tone. "I almost imagined I saw a light in its eyes. It seemed as if the skull was alive!"

Imro Fox sat up in his chair. His strong face was a mask that hid every trace of feeling, but there was a light smoldering in his dark eyes, brighter and fiercer than the flames of the firelight. But he spoke not a word. His pipe had gone out, and he reached for a new splinter to revive it.

"It laughed at you?" he repeated suddenly.

"It did!" his two guests answered in chorus.

"That is a different matter," the detective said soberly. "It shouldn't have laughed, you know. Did anything else happen?"

Barrington Thurd was squirming in his chair. He was exasperated almost to the breaking point. He did not know, and had no means of knowing, that the calm-voiced detective was delighted at the odd problem just opened before him. To Thurd it seemed as if he were telling his story to a dawdling man of leisure, who was more or less indifferent. But he was to learn more of the ways of Imro Fox before his problem was solved.

"Certainly something else happened," he rasped. "As we two stood there dumbfounded, watching the actions of that skull, it suddenly stopped laughing and spoke to us!"

"Spoke in a whisper!" prompted the unconquerable Dr. Cleft.

"In a whisper!" agreed Thurd. "It was a loud whisper, like one hears on the stage. And this is what came from between those two rows of rotting teeth you see there: 'I am here and I never pause. To-morrow prepare for torture; torture and torment that you have inflicted, and torture that you shall suffer seven-fold!' "

Thurd fell back in his chair and wiped away the sweat from his brow.

"Did you ever torture any one?" inquired Imro Fox, with disconcerting directness.

The big financier started.

"Of course not," he growled. "I've thought of nothing else but this infernal thing all day long. Dr. Cleft insists that it is a demonstration from some other plane—a ghost or something. But I don't believe him; at least I don't want to. And when to-night, after dinner, it did the same thing—I mean, it laughed at me again, as I sat working over some of the accounts in my library which adjoins my bedroom; I could hear it through the portieres—I felt I should go mad if I did not get some expert advice. Then I remembered that my friend, Captain Hurley, of Police Headquarters, had once mentioned your connection with the police to me, and I got him on the phone. He gave me your address, and at ten o'clock to-night I left home in my car, in all this storm, and here we are. Now, Mr. Fox, what is going to happen to me?"

Imro Fox did not immediately reply. He did not trust himself to speak at that moment, for he was inwardly tremendously excited. The possibilities suggested by the extraordinary story to which he had just hearkened was stirring him to the vitals of his imagination; the lure of the mystery that lay concealed within the cranium of the grinning object on the table was tempting. Yet Imro Fox insisted always on disciplining himself; of absolutely mastering his own emotions. So he did not speak until the flush of the kindling enthusiasm within had passed. Then he became a different personality altogether.

With a bound he rose from his chair and faced his callers.

"I'll take your case," he said sharply. "But I must be given a free hand, and allowed to do just as I please until I find the culprit. Then you can decide what shall be done with him—that is, whether it shall be an affair for the regular police."

"You actually think it is an affair with a culprit?" cried Dr. Cleft. "Nonsense! I was sure that a learned man like yourself would instantly recognize that this was a manifestation from another world!"

"Possibly so!" The investigator's tone was cutting. "Perhaps from the criminal world. In any event, you may be sure that it is entirely a human business, and that no ghosts are mixed up in it. Ghosts are not so revengeful or malicious."

"Then what shall I do?" asked Thurd.

"For to-night you will leave the skull with me. I shall want to examine it. You will go home as if nothing had occurred; you will go to your place of business to-morrow morning as if nothing had occurred, and you will say nothing to any one concerning the case. To-morrow about noon I shall arrive at your house. Inasmuch as that Hurley has been telling so many people of my connection with the detective department, perhaps it will be better if I preserve an alias. I shall be simply Algernon Smith, an old friend of yours. I shall mingle freely with your guests, and work out the puzzle as I see best. That is all you will be called upon to do at present. Later, I shall seek an opportunity, unobserved, of course, to examine every room in the house!"

"Shocking!" ejaculated the offended Dr. Cleft.

"But necessary. And I will thank you now to give me a complete list of those who are visiting you."

Barrington Thurd counted them off on his short, pudgy fingers.

"Dr. Cleft is one," he said. "Enrique Villafranca, a Costa Rican banana planter, is two. Edgerton Holmes, an up-state banker, is another. With him is his daughter, Marian Holmes, who is a great friend of my daughter Helen. That is all."

"Your wife living?" inquired Imro Fox.

Barrington Thurd reddened.

"I never had a wife," he answered thickly. "Helen is a child I adopted when she was but a year old—out of a very unfortunate family. Both her parents are dead."

"And your sister?"

"Emilie is an old maid. You will find her a little—er—disagreeable, but a most excellent housekeeper."

Imro Fox glanced at his watch.

"You gentlemen have a long journey before you," he said. "You should start now. Remember my instructions, and on no account allow any one to know the purpose of my visit."

Thurd and Dr. Cleft gave him every assurance that his identity would be protected, and Imro Fox led them down the broad front staircase to the door. He watched them, as, after solemn hand-shaking, they stepped out into the hideous tempest and groped their way down to the machine.

"Home, Frank!" boomed Thurd, and a moment later the machine was speeding like a frightened thing out of the estate of Mystic Towers.

There was a whimsical smile on the thin lips of Imro Fox as he slowly retraced his way up the stairs. Already his mind was busy with the problem. He was reviewing in his mind the conversation he had had with his callers, when he was suddenly startled by a shrill yell of mortal fear. It came from the library.

With a bound, he reached the top landing, where he was almost upset in a collision with a fleeing mix-up of black

and white. Nebuchadnezzar Noots, his face almost white, was ready to jump to the second floor in a single leap.

"What's wrong?"

"Dey's a—good Lawd, Mistah Fox! Did you see whut's on yo' table?" breathed the negro.

"That skull? You're not afraid of that, Neb?"

"Yassuh! I ain't 'fraid of most skulls, but I'se sho 'fraid o' dat one. It don' look lak no haid I ever saw befo'. And I heered a noise in dere!"

"What kind of poise, Neb? Speak the truth, now—I don't want any lies!"

"No, sur! I heard somebody laughin'!"

"Laughing!"

Imro Fox's voice held a thrill in it as he repeated the word, almost reverently. The famous investigator was beginning to hold the mystery upon which he had set out in an almost reverent, superstitious awe.

"You were listening to our conversation?" he charged.

"No, suh! I was down-stairs, warming my feet, what's got de mizry!"

Imro Fox considered a moment.

"Go down and bring me a box of plaster-of-paris," he said, "and a bowl and mixer. And be quick about it."

Glad to be released, the negro straddled the curving bannister and slid to the floor in precipitate haste. Meanwhile, Imro Fox entered his library and walked up to the skull about which such weird things had been told him. And as he took the cold, yellow head into his hands, he was forced to admit that it was not an ordinary one. In fact, it was the oddest shaped head he had ever seen.

The wide, flat top, the low brow, with its sharp incline backward, the brutish jaws and the long, almost fang-like teeth, were eloquent in their testimony to this scientific detective. They spoke of a mentality of the very lowest ebb. Indeed, he fancied he detected more than a family resemblance to the famous Piltdown skull, said to be more than 200,000 years old. In shape and in size it greatly resembled it. Yet Imro Fox knew that the skull was not aged; that in all probability its owner had been dead not more than fifty years, if indeed that long. He noticed that the jaws had been rudely hinged with leather thongs.

He handled it with the greatest of care, for he had a faint hope that a telltale thumb print or finger print might have been left somewhere on its surface. Such indications, he had learned by bitter experience, were extremely rare, but it was a chance that was not to be lost. Suddenly Neb Noots appeared in the doorway, but halted resolutely.

"You come hyar and take dese," he pleaded.

"Nothing can hurt you, Neb," said the detective kindly, for the negro's distress of mind was pitiful. "Stick close and watch what I do to this thing."

For the next few moments Fox was busy mixing the plaster-of-paris, and while he labored he talked volubly to the wide-mouthed Neb, who understood not a word of what was being spoken to him.

"The size and shape of the human brain," rattled Fox, "are a surer indication to a man's character and his mental capacity, and more particularly the passions that are likely to rule him, than anything else. His face will never tell the tales while he is alive that his brain reveals to the trained mind when he is dead, and his head is cut open. I have made a special study of the subject, Neb."

"Yas, suh!" said Neb, watching his employer with eyes that grew wider every moment. The detective had turned the skull upside-down, so that its jaws were toward the ceiling, and into the crevice at the bottom he poured the melted plaster until it overflowed. This overflow he carefully scraped away with the charred splinter which had served as a torch for his pipe.

"That is why I have spent so much time around hospitals in the last few years," continued Imro Fox amiably. "I have been getting the brains of all the dead men I could, and checking up my observations on the size and shape of them by investigations into their private lives and characters. The results would astonish you. For instance, I hope to be able to tell something definite in a moment about the gentleman whose thoughts were once born inside this piece of bone."

"Yas, suh!" breathed Neb.

The detective had waited for the plaster to harden. Now, with the most delicate care, he began dislodging the solid piece, until at last it lay intact on his hand. It was shaped like a deformed hen's egg, flattened at the top, and with odd curves and indentations all around it.

"A monstrosity!" exclaimed the detective, admiration mingling with astonishment in his voice.

"Yas, suh!" agreed Neb Noots fervently. "Dat's jest whut it am—a monstrosity!"

It was indeed the most peculiarly shaped brain Imro Fox had ever seen. The plaster mould he had made gave him all that was necessary to know—that the creature whose headbones now rested on his library table had been a being of almost incalculable cruelty and fury; a creature of the most savage instincts, whose intellect was on a par with the very lowest in the human scale. Indeed, Fox whimsically wondered if he were not, at that moment looking upon a relic of the long-sought missing link.

Dismissing Nebuchadnezzar, who was not loath to leave the apartment, the detective placed the brain model carefully aside, and put the skull on the table. Then he went to the telephone, on a smaller table at the rear, and spoke a number into the receiver. In a very few moments he was answered.

"Is that Inspector Brad?" asked Imro Fox. "Listen to me carefully! The following persons are now guests of Barrington Thurd, the banker and broker, at his home in Larchmont: A Dr. Cleft, Enrique Villafranca, Edgerton Holmes and his daughter Marian. I want complete reports on everything you can get about the history, public or private, of those people. I want the same thing about Barrington Thurd, his sister and his adopted daughter and every one else in the house. I don't care how many men you put on the case. I want that information brought to me in a sealed package at the Thurd home in Larchmont to-morrow evening. All right?"

"All right!"

Imro Fox hung up the receiver with a sigh. He walked back to the table, and slowly lifted the yellow skull again in his hands. He stared at it steadily. Then he walked back to his seat by the fireplace, and, seating himself, put the skull on his knees. He looked at it long and earnestly. Outside the wind was screeching and howling like a demented spirit. The wet sleet dashed against the trembling window panes. It was bitter cold, he knew.

Then he started up, a puzzled frown on his face. Between the teeth of the skull was something small and white; a bit of note-paper that he had not noticed before. With a muttered exclamation he drew it out and read:

"PROFESSOR IMRO FOX: Don't take their case; their money isn't worth it. Devote your powers to a worthy cause and let destiny work out its vengeance where it wills!"

There was no signature.

With an odd little laugh, Imro Fox threw the note into the fire. An observer would have been puzzled at the action; would have imagined, perhaps, that the note would have been worth something in the way of evidence; that its handwriting might have furnished a clue. But Imro Fox does unusual things. He lifted the skull until it was close to his face and spoke to it.

"Why write to me?" he demanded tauntingly. "Why didn't you whisper—and laugh?"

CHAPTER THREE

AN INTERVIEW WITH A DEAD MAN

PROFESSOR IMRO FOX, alias plain Algernon Smith, was late in arriving at the home of Mr. Barrington Thurd at Larchmont.

It so chanced that there were labor troubles on the railroad, which caused a long and annoying wait on the lower level of Grand Central Station, and which made the train drag a weary pace through New Rochelle, Pelham and other of the fashionable suburbs of Westchester County, before he finally stepped to the platform of his place of destination.

Somewhat to his surprise, he found no one waiting for him, and on making inquiries he learned readily enough that the Barrington Thurd home was easily a mile from the station. Not altogether pleased at the lack of attention, Imro Fox bade Neb Noots, who was carrying his bags, to follow him, and they set off on foot.

It may be stated parenthetically that Nebuchadnezzar Noots did not know that the traveling bag in his left hand contained the mysterious skull which he had seen on the library table the previous evening.

The storm had cleared away at dawn, and though the roads were in bad shape the investigator soon forgot to be annoyed in the swift tang of the autumn breeze that made the day so pleasant. He was walking briskly, his thoughts far removed from the bizarre matters which had brought him to this locality, when a hand suddenly seized his arm.

He turned and found himself facing a bronzed, wiry, gray-haired man, who bowed deferentially and touched his wide felt hat.

"Pardon me," said the man respectfully. "Is this Mr. Algernon Smith? I am from Mr. Thurd's home, and I have been looking for you. Mr. Thurd gave me a good description, but I did not recognize you at once. I had to race to catch up with you, sir."

He relieved the grateful and astounded Neb of one of the bags—and it may be added Neb, all unconsciously, still retained the one containing the death's head—and led the way back toward the station, where a huge yellow automobile was parked and purring on the grass. It was a garish but very expensive imported machine.

"It looks like Thurd dresses," was Fox's uncomplimentary thought, as he stepped into the rear. He was studying the face of the chauffeur, and noting the intelligent mould of his face and the ready sparkle of his eyes, decided that he might learn something by a gentle third degree.

"Is Mr. Thurd at home—er—ah—what did you say your name was?" he began.

"Frank, sir. Frank Morton. Yes, sir. Mr. Thurd has not returned from the city. Generally he comes in on the train before the one that brought you here—that is, on Saturdays."

"Are all the other guests at the house now?"

"Oh, yes, sir. They've been there all summer."

"Rather late for them to stay on, isn't it—into November?"

"Perhaps so, sir. That's as they and Mr. Thurd wish, sir."

This mild and respectful reproof seemed to come out with a great effort. Like every well-tutored servant, Morton was evidently in great distress at being called upon to converse with his betters.

"Do they ever quarrel?" asked Mr. Fox with startling suddenness.

"Yes, sir!" exclaimed Morton, and then, reddening painfully, he bent over his wheel and murmured incoherent qualifications. He plainly felt that he had been guilty of an indiscretion and was resolved to say no more. Imro Fox wisely decided to refrain from any further questioning, but he made up his mind that if he could gain this man's good will he would have a valuable ally in working in the household of Barrington Thurd.

By this time they had reached the gateway and were riding through an avenue of beeches and willows and mighty oaks that wound picturesquely around a bluff on which the home of the financier had been constructed. It was an imposing example of what a lot of money, bad taste and an architect willing to sell his birthright can do when given a fair chance. It was an example of what Imro Fox called "ginger-bread architecture." There were cupolas and verandas and towers and what-nots springing out in the most unlikely and unexpected of places. Ornate, large, glittering—like its owner. Such was the dwelling place of the man haunted by the loquacious skull.

As he mounted the wide steps which led to the front porch, Prof. Fox saw Dr. Cleft's cadaverous countenance vanish from one of the windows to the left, and presently that lean dignitary came hurriedly forward, extending his fish-like hand in an excess of cordial welcome.

"Professor Fox—er—ah—Mr. Smith!" he cried. "I am glad you are here. Things look bad. Mighty bad. Mighty bad, Mr. Smith!"

"In what way?" inquired the investigator, as he saw Neb follow the chauffeur into the house. He did not fancy a long conversation with Dr. Cleft now; he wanted to start on his investigation without delay.

"Four hours late!" Dr. Cleft put his finger tips together and solemnly regarded Imro Fox. "Does that mean nothing to you, professor? Especially after I have telephoned his office, and they say he left there at noon?"

"You mean——"

"That the skull told him he would suffer torture to-day! God knows what may be happening to our friend now."

Imro Fox felt sure there was no connection, and said so. He was about to pass on when a girl suddenly appeared in the doorway. She was slender, yet athletic, with a profusion of blue-black hair that coiled in an enchanting knot at her back. There was a single rose below the knot—a white rose. Her eyes, as she turned them toward the investigator, were large and very dark, and Imro Fox fancied that hidden in them he saw lurking an anxiety, a secret something that was making her nervous.

"Ah!" exclaimed Dr. Cleft, stepping forward. "Mr. Smith, this is Mr. Thurd's daughter, Helen."

Fox bowed, murmuring his acknowledgments. Helen Thurd responded with a slight smile that Fox could have sworn was forced. After that one smile she ignored him, turning to Dr. Cleft with a question about her father. When Dr. Cleft told her that nothing had been heard from him since noon, Imro Fox read something on her face that escaped the attention of the doctor, but which

to the investigator was a revelation. A flash of pleasure, almost of positive relief, came into her eyes, and she turned without a word to disappear into the house.

"I will take you to your room," proposed Dr. Cleft rather awkwardly, turning to Fox.

"Yes. I should like to be alone for a little while. Then I should like to see the bedroom where I understand the original manifestation of our friend the dead man took place. I will see you at that time."

By this delicate hint Fox managed to get rid of Dr. Cleft for a time at least. His room was a large and well furnished one in the east wing, containing an excellent view of the Sound. Neb was there, putting things to order, but Fox sent him below with instructions regarding the receipt of any package which might arrive. He was taking no chances on the information which he expected from the police department falling into undesirable hands.

As he passed the center window of his room, while removing some personal papers from his bags, the investigator happened to glance through it, and noticed something to which his entire attention was immediately riveted. From his position of vantage—the room being on the third floor—he could look down into the garden, which was hidden from the view of those on the lower floors by trees and dense shrubbery. What interested Fox in the garden so particularly at this moment was a man hiding behind a tree.

Fox could see him plainly. He was a young man—certainly not more than twenty-five—and was apparently decently dressed. But his black-and-white checked cap was drawn far down over his eyes, and his surreptitious manner made it evident that he was mightily afraid of being detected on the grounds. While Fox was trying to decide what it were best for him to do under these unexpected and fortunate circumstances, he was suddenly amazed to see Helen Thurd come running down a narrow pathway, looking to the right and left, her lips moving as if she were calling some one softly.

The man instantly responded, stepping out cautiously. As he watched their faces Imro Fox did not need to be a great detective to know that they were lovers. Indeed, all possible doubts were relieved the next moment by the fierce embrace into which the man caught the girl.

Now it is often necessary for a detective to do disagreeable and unpleasant things. All that is romantic in his bosom must be crushed out by the iron hand of duty. It was the duty—the plain duty—of Fox to find out everything hidden in this household, in view of the extraordinary things that had occurred so recently. And this man, lover of Helen Thurd, as he might be, was plainly in hiding.

The investigator stole hurriedly from the room, made his way quickly down to a rear door which he had noticed when being taken to his room, and passed out into the garden. Having surveyed the prospect from his window, he was intimately familiar with its layout, and so, by keeping in the rear of the shrubbery hedge, he was enabled to draw very close to the hidden pair without being observed, and fancied he also heard something suspiciously like a woman's sob.

"That is too good for him!" the man said, his voice gritty with anger. "I could do anything to him and absolve my soul—even to torturing him—even to——"

"Oh, Carter!" pleaded Helen's voice in deepest agony. "Don't talk so. He is my father—you mustn't forget that!"

"He has forgotten it!" cried the man passionately. "He has treated you inhumanly, and this is the crowning indignity. By God, he's got to pay for it. I'll fix him. I'll fix him!"

Helen was sobbing now as if her heart was close on breaking. The man spoke to her soothingly, begging her to forgive him for his outburst, and yielding to her entreaties that he hold on to himself; that all would yet be well.

"I shall be of age within a year, Carter," she told him. "Surely you can wait that long."

Soon she told him he must go; at any moment they might be discovered; their conversation overheard. There were more fond words, and then the man leaped lightly across a fence, disappearing into a thicket. Imro Fox could hear him swashing angrily through the dead leaves and the underbrush. And he could hear the sobbing of Helen Thurd, as she dried her tears and slowly retraced her way back to the house.

Certainly it had been an illuminating ten minutes. Imro Fox gathered that here was a secret love affair, and that Barrington Thurd had treated his daughter so illy in the past that she lived in mortal terror of him, and had confided her treatment to her impulsive young lover.

"And torturing would be too good for him, would it?" murmured Fox, reminiscently.

He began to feel the presence of hidden things; to hear the whir of wheels within wheels. Morton, the chauffeur, caught off his guard, had admitted there were quarrels among the guests. Among which guests? And this love affair made another complication. There might be more ramifications to the case than Imro Fox had at first suspected.

But the events of the afternoon were not yet all enacted. As Fox strode back to the house, he passed a small corridor, and as he walked habitually with the utmost lightness, there was little if any warning of his approach. Consequently, as he crossed this corridor, he came upon the spectacle of a small, dark man, with thin, black mustache and fierce eyes, on his knees before a closed door. Something metallic glittered in his hands, and Fox could have sworn the small, dark gentleman was doing his best to force the lock on the door.

The dark man rose with a gasp of fury when he saw that he had been detected, and thrust the metallic object quickly into his pocket. Then, with a gulping effort, he sought to regain his composure.

"Ah-ha!" he cried in a squeaky little voice. "I have dropped zee—what you call eem—quartaire—on zee floor. I cannot——"

The ubiquitous Dr. Cleft suddenly stalked around the edge of the corridor, rubbing his hands and frowning ominously.

"Professor Fox—er—Mr. Smith," he fluttered, "er—ah—permit me, gentlemen, Mr. Algernon Smith meet Mr. Enrique Villafranca!"

Professor Imro Fox, alias Mr. Algernon Smith, bowed with a Chesterfieldian grace that held something mocking in its very sweep and turn. It was responded to with a grace and courtesy that showed Senor Villafranca to be a man of breeding, whatever his intentions on the door might have been.

After a few words of conventional inanities, Senor Villafranca excused himself and hurried off. When the echo of his footsteps had quite died away Fox turned to Dr. Cleft and cautioned him not to make any more mistakes with his name.

"Remember now!" he cautioned. "My name is Algernon Smith."

Dr. Cleft promised to remember.

"Now," said Fox in a businesslike tone, "I should like to know where that door leads to?"

He pointed to the door before which Enrique Villafranca had been kneeling when he had come upon him.

"That?" Dr. Cleft's voice was expressive with awe and the profoundest reverence. "Why, that is the private office of Dr. Thurd. I understand that he keeps all sorts of important papers stored in his private safe in there!"

"Indeed?" murmured Fox. "Suppose"—he paused a moment, his brain busy with the tremendous possibilities that were suddenly opening before his mental vision—"suppose," he continued, "that you take me into the library."

Obediently Dr. Cleft led him through the larger corridor to a massive door which opened into a large and elaborately furnished room. Its character was self-evident to the investigator the moment he entered it. The walls were lined with bookcases, loaded with the best literature of all lands and times, but Fox knew, without looking at them, that the leaves of the volumes had probably never been cut, unless other members of the family had been at them. It was the library of a wealthy man who found his pleasures elsewhere than in books.

The furniture of the room was massive and luxurious. In one corner was a large desk, littered with papers, where Barrington Thurd added up his fortune at nights, just for relaxation. At the other end there were folding doors, partly opened, with portieres of a rich fabric.

"That," explained Dr. Cleft, following the investigator's glance, "is Mr. Thurd's sleeping apartment. It is a whim of our host that it be down here."

"He will not mind if I go in, do you suppose?" asked Imro Fox, and without more ado he passed in. This room, too, was elaborate, luxuriously furnished, with every comfort that money could buy. There was even a heavy perfume in the air, for Barrington Thurd, like many men of his kind, was something of a fop.

"There," said Dr. Cleft, pointing his bony forefinger at the bureau, "is where the head whispered and laughed at us."

"Wait here!" said Imro Fox suddenly.

He hurried through the library, and up the stairs to his room, and quickly removed the skull, wrapped in its mantle of black velvet. With this under his arm, he hurried down the stairs. On the way down he nearly ran into Villafranca, spluttering a string of directions indignantly to a maid and Morton, the chauffeur, and he thanked his stars that he had the head covered. He did not particularly care for the glance with which the Costa Rican banana planter favored him as he passed.

"That fellow," said Fox to himself, as he continued down the stairs, "will bear watching."

Dr. Cleft was standing in the library doorway when Imro Fox returned, and together they went into the sleeping room again. A silence fell upon them, while Dr. Cleft watched with unconcealed curiosity the movements of his companion.

The investigator removed the velvet covering from the ghastly head and set it deliberately on the bureau. He stood off from it, watching it first from one angle and then from another. At that moment there came a knocking at the library door. Dr. Cleft went over to answer it, and Fox, with a last glance at the skull, followed.

A tall, angular woman stood in the doorway, a large white envelope in her hand. She was promptly introduced as Miss Emilie Thurd, the sister of the host. She was an old maid, with a hard face and a New England primness that did not soften as she gazed upon the latest addition to her household cares. She announced that the envelope had just been received by a messenger, and turned it over to the investigator, who pocketed it carelessly, but with thanks. She then stalked away.

"Not a very gracious customer," was Fox's mental comment, and he remembered what Thurd had said of her. He wondered vaguely how she and Helen got on together. "This is a household of cheerful creatures, I don't think," he added to himself. But his thoughts went no further. He was arrested by the most unearthly sound he had ever heard in his life.

From behind the curtains that screened the bedroom from his gaze there came a long, low roll of whispered laughter. It ran on weirdly, with a kind of monotone, as if there had been no beginning to its weird amusement and would have no end. Mingled with its throaty noises was an odd, uneven kind of clicking that chilled the marrow in the bones of the unimaginative, hardened detective.

For an instant the two men looked at each other in cold, somber silence. Dr. Cleft was white, and his bony knuckles were encircled by trembling fingers. His shoulders were hunched forward, as if at any instant he might dash through the doorway and run.

"It's the skull!" he murmured fearfully, and speaking with great effort. "It's the whispering head!"

Imro Fox shook himself free from the uncanny grip the sound had fastened on him. He strode through the curtains and confronted as weird a sight as his eyes had ever looked upon.

There was the skull, rocking back and forth on the top of the bureau where he had placed it, its jaws clicking together, and from between its teeth came forth that odd, whispering laughter. The thing had almost a human look. Its grin was intensified, and it moved as if it were alive.

"Stop where you are!" cried the frightened Dr. Cleft. "It's from the lower astral, I tell you. It's not of this earth. Don't go near it, as you value your mortal soul."

Imro Fox said nothing at all. He stood there, gazing at it, but there was a patient look of expectancy in his glittering eyes. And suddenly the laughter ceased. The movement of the head stopped, the jaws ceased to click, and it seemed to right itself. And then it spoke.

In that same, uncanny whisper, as if from some doomed soul, came out a voice, and the words that it spoke were these:

"It is as was spoken. Barrington Thurd is now in the first torment. There will be others. Do not seek him out; he is in a place where he cannot be found. But he will return!"

A dead silence ensued. There was no more laughter, no more whispered messages, not a single clicking movement from the jaws of the head. It remained there, staring at them with its steady, everlasting grin, as if defying the detection of its secret.

Imro Fox walked up to it and took it into his hands. He turned it over and looked into it. He opened its jaws and stared long at its fang-like teeth. For a long while he examined it. And at last, with a little whistle of triumph, he stuck in two fingers, and drew out something which he rolled between his finger tips and thrust into his pocket.

Then he turned to face Dr. Cleft, but he had fled.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT THE POLICE HAD TO SAY.

IMRO FOX paused and for a moment considered what he should do. A plan of action formed itself almost automatically in his mind; it has ever been his contention that given all the factors of a problem, the trained analytical

mind can calculate unerringly and that the answer in one hundred cases out of a hundred will be correct. He felt certain that most of the needed factors of the problem were before him now.

As he stood thinking a breath of cold air swept across his face, as if a haunted, invisible image had passed him. It startled him and made him whirl quickly. He was just in time to see the curtains swaying and shuddering, as if an unseen person had passed through. He sprang forward.

Emerging breathlessly into the library, he found himself confronting an empty room. The ticking clock on the desk seemed to look back at him with a mocking stare. There was no one beside himself about.

A smothered oath at his own nerves died on his lips, as sudden illumination flashed into his mind.

"A breeze from the dead!" he exclaimed half aloud. "Why, of course. Why hadn't I thought of that? The matter is becoming simplified."

Whistling a merry tune of pure relief and mental relaxation, he went to the library door and sprang the heavy bolt with which it was equipped. Thus secured from interruption, he sat down in the easy-chair, and, with his hands locked behind his head, he began to ponder. Something told him he would do better to review what he already knew before venturing to seek new clues in this haunted apartment.

What motive lay behind the apparently malicious conversations of the skull, altogether aside from the mystery of how it was made to speak?

Was the continued absence of Barrington Thurd an evidence that the skull had spoken truly in its prediction that the millionaire would be tormented?

Was there any connection between the vindictive threats against Barrington Thurd and the rage of the man called Carter, with whom Helen Thurd had been conversing?

With a slow smile Imro Fox reached into his breast pocket of his coat and drew out the long, plain envelope which Emilie Thurd had given him a short while before. This undoubtedly would throw light on some of the dark places in the case; it was the confidential report of Inspector Brad, regarding these very people; the information Fox had requested over the telephone.

Upon ripping open the envelope, Fox discovered there were several sheets of note paper, typewritten much in the form of a report from Dun's or Bradstreet's. He shuffled them rapidly, arranging them in order, and then perused the first. It was as follows:

BARRINGTON THURD—Age 58 years. Started life as a jewelry store clerk with Fenning, Cator & Co. Became an expert lapidary. Made general manager of the place following the getaway of Arthur West with half a million dollars' worth of diamonds in 1902. From this point on he developed into a man of big business. Has been identified with several enterprises that went to smash under suspicious circumstances, notably the Macon Oil Co. scandal, but nothing has ever been proved against him.

The report went on with a detailed enumeration of Thurd's investments, the clubs to which he belonged, and other personal data, which Fox passed for later study. He then read the others in the following order, much of the detailed matter being omitted here, the essentials only being preserved:

EMILIE THURD—Barrington Thurd's sister. Member of the Sacred Order of the Bat, an Eastern mystic enterprise. Disagrees with her brother on every conceivable subject. The neighbors say they have frequent quarrels.

HELEN THURD—Age 17 years. Adopted when an infant by Barrington Thurd, when her mother died, leaving no surviving relatives. Has studied at Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia. According to the servants of the neighbors, she has a secret love affair with Carter Hemmenway, a poverty-stricken young artist, who is detested by her guardian.

DR. SAMUEL CLEFT—A student of occult matters, who originally was invited to the Thurd home by Emilie Thurd and later ingratiated himself into the good graces of the brother. Is endeavoring to convert Barrington Thurd to occultism.

ENRIQUE VILLAFRANCA—A Costa Rican banana planter. Came to this country two years ago. Is known to have invested enormous sums in the latest scheme under promotion by Thurd, and it is rumored in the Street that a crash is coming. It is reported that Villafranca has demanded an accounting.

EDGERTON HOLMES—An up-state banker with whom Thurd has had business relations.

MARIAN HOLMES—His daughter, a school chum of Helen Thurd.

With a sigh Imro Fox replaced the papers in the envelope and tucked it away carefully in his pocket.

"Motive! Motive! Motive!" he murmured. "There is enough motive there for any number of crimes. By Jove!"

This last exclamation burst from him like a volcanic eruption. He seized the envelope again and rapidly drew out the papers. One after another he discarded, until he held one of them up and read it eagerly.

"There!" he cried. "That slip contains the winning clue, or I'm a dunce. And to think it might have escaped me!"

Without more ado, he replaced the papers and walked over to the desk telephone. In a few moments he had Inspector Brad on the telephone. The instructions that he gave the Inspector were so low that they were indistinguishable, except in the ears of that attentive detective. Those instructitns were regarding two particular assignments, and Imro Fox urged upon Brad the necessity for prompt and careful action. Brad promised faithfully that all Imro Fox wished done would be accomplished.

There was a glint something much like satisfaction in the eyes of the investigator as he hung up the receiver.

There, in the papers tucked away in his coat, he had the starting point to the actual unravelment of the mystery. Hidden away it had been, inconspicuous it had been, but it had been enough to start his alert brain working, and already he saw a possible hope of solution.

Imro Fox now gave an anxious glance at the clock. It was well after five; dinner would surely be at six, and from what he had seen of his hostess, he felt sure he would be required to dress for dinner. Formality had been written over her face like a signboard. Yet he felt anxious to make a thorough investigation of these rooms unhindered, and he did not know when he might get the opportunity again. Dodging Dr. Cleft was no easy task.

He resolved to risk being late, and had any one been watching him during the next half an hour they would have been amazed at the speed and the thoroughness which the investigator exhibited. He removed the carpets from the floors, he looked behind the pictures on the walls, he moved the chairs and the beds—not even the window curtains were sacred to his touch. He got on his knees and fumbled about among the dead embers of a log in the fireplace. There was not an object that he did not lift or move. There was no part of the floor that he did not examine and scrutinize. At last he rose and faced the skull which grinned back at him from the bureau, as if in derisive challenge.

"Well, old boy," said Fox gayly, "I've found out that the wireless method used by the late Dr. Ellison is not being employed here. I heard you speak, and I can swear you don't have the squeak of a ventriloquist. And you don't have the rasp and squawk of a talking machine. Therefore it's up to me to find out what you are anyway!"

The skull made no reply. Imro Fox did not expect it to. In the back of his brain a theory as to the mysterious performances of the skull already had begun to form, and he was now about to test it. First he drew out all the bureau drawers and examined them carefully. Disappointed in his search there, he moved out the bureau itself,

tilted it until it stood upon two of its rollers, and poked and pounded its sides until his knuckles ached.

"Queer! Damned queer!" he muttered. "I don't see how——"

He stopped and sank to the floor. He worked and worried over the hardwood sections, seeking some hidden opening, some something that would give him the clue he sought. But there was nothing. He rose, red and dusty and annoyed, and with a baleful look at the grinning head, reposing so comfortably on the bureau top, he passed through to the library and unlocked the door.

For an instant, he paused before leaving. He was undecided. He found it impossible to be sure of one thing—and he had barely time to dress for dinner.

In his own mind he was not sure whether or not he had heard a whispering, taunting laugh as he passed through the curtains, or whether it had been an illusion of his own imagination.

At any rate, Imro Fox is not an imaginative man.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT HAPPENED TO BARRINGTON THURD?

THE dinner was a doleful affair.

Barrington Thurd had not returned; no word had been received from him, and no one could conjecture what had caused him to change the habits of a lifetime in such an unexpected manner. Emilie Thurd was austerely reticent, but her eyes indicated that it was a heavy trial for a poor, weak female to bear the worry of a man like that.

Imro Fox was presented to Edgerton Holmes, a mild, insignificant type of man, and his pretty, froth-like daughter, who insisted on whispering giggled secrets into the ears of Helen Thurd. The latter heard her with a patient kind of tolerance and the forced smile which Fox had noticed when he had first seen her. Villafranca and Dr. Cleft were the only really talkative people at the table, and they engaged in an animated conversation on the relative merits of Leoncavallo, who had recently passed away, and Mascagni. Villafranca grew quite noisy about the matter, and the argument grew exciting, until the shocked expression of Emilie Thurd, as she caught the eye of Dr. Cleft, brought the discussion to an abrupt close.

Imro Fox was glad when the dinner was over. He did not hope to gain much from conversing with any of these people; he felt that all of them were too clever to be taken in, even by the most adroit questioning, even assuming that any of them were guilty. It was up to him to first settle several matters in his own mind, and then spring a trap and catch the guilty one in such a way that denial would be out of the question.

That was the plan in his mind, and he promptly set out to carry it into effect.

He began his operations by asking Dr. Cleft to telephone all the friends of Barrington Thurd, and every other place that he might possibly have gone, and make purely casual inquiries. Particularly he cautioned the man not to betray any undue interest, because Barrington Thurd would certainly never care to have his friends believe that he was a missing man.

Fox then strolled into the billiard room, where he found Villafranca shooting with Marian Holmes. With these he chatted a while, noticing in that time that the Costa Rican's attitude was still one of veiled, polite hostility, and then moved on until he was again at the library door. He passed in, closed the door behind him, and flashed on the lights.

All was as he had left it. Through the curtains he caught a glimpse of the head as it grinned in a shaft of moonlight. To a man with nerves less strong, remembering all the circumstances, the sight might have been unnerving. But Fox found it stimulating; it dared him to ferret out its mystery.

Carefully locking the door behind him, he resumed the investigations which the call of dinner had interrupted two hours before. If he had been thorough in that original investigation, he was doubly so now. And as midnight came on he found himself facing the head on the bureau, not one whit wiser than before.

But there was not the same baffled feeling of helplessness in his breast now. He had eliminated possible factors in his first search. Now he was seeking for the remaining factor—the true explanation—for on finding out the exact modus operandi of this talking death's head would depend an important part of the scheme which he had sketched for the detection of the guilty man. So far he had failed. But there yet remained a possibility, and he determined to try it.

Leaving the library, he passed down the corridor, and across the small hall, until he was at the door through which he had gone to overhear what passed between Helen Thurd and her lover. Softly opening the door, he stepped into the garden, and moving cautiously across the turf, he finally found himself on the other side of the house. Here he was in plain view of any one who might be watching him, for the moon was full and bathed all the lawn with its white, cold brilliance. But in one way this was a blessing—it aided Fox in what he had come out here to look for.

He had traversed nearly the entire length of the house when he stopped, with a low exclamation, and bending low, studied something attentively. Then he stooped and lifted something from the ground. It was something long and black and thin, like a hair. Imro Fox wound it around his finger, and placed it with the police reports in his envelope. And then he went back to the library.

Dawn found him curled up in Barrington Thurd's big arm-chair, an open volume of the "Encyclopedia Britannica," Volume "Rot-Sia," on his knee.

Over a page, near the center of the volume, he had fallen fast asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

IN THE PRIVATE OFFICE

THE proprietor of the handsome home where Fox was a guest did not return on Sunday, nor did he communicate with anyone within its confines.

As he climbed under the covers, in his room on the third floor, that night, the investigator felt very much like a man who has dropped several baited lines in the water and is waiting for the fish to bite.

There was something very much like a jerk on the line when he awoke the next morning. Neb Noots was standing at his bedside, shaking him eagerly.

"Mistah Fox," he said, "Dr. Cleft, he down-stairs all het up 'bout somefin. He wants to know if you can't come right down."

Imro Fox was out of bed in a moment, and in a surprisingly short time was dressed, even to the neatest of neat knots in his tie, with his diamond sphinx scarf pin in its

certain place, and a moment later he had come upon the disheveled and decidedly excited figure of the doctor, in the front reception hall.

"It's Thurd!" he gasped. "I've had word from him!"

"How?" snapped Imro Fox.

"He telephoned me. He said we were to take an automobile and come right to his office downtown without saying a word to any one."

As he spoke, the yellow automobile rolled up before the door, and Fox acknowledged to himself that for once Dr. Cleft had shown himself capable of sensible and decisive action. Without delay, the two got overcoats and told Morton, the chauffeur, to take them to Thurd's office in Wall Street with all speed possible.

"He was weeping over the telephone," said Dr. Cleft. "I tell you he was actually hysterical; his voice was husky, unlike I have ever heard it before, and he begged and pleaded that we hurry."

They hurried. Many times they were railed at by indignant policemen, but Imro Fox assured Frank Morton that there would be no trouble on that score; that he could straighten out any difficulty they might have with the traffic laws, and so, in really surprising time, they found themselves worrying in the tangle of downtown New York, where they were subjected to many heart-breaking delays. It was well past nine o'clock when they finally reached the office building.

A stunning surprise greeted them when they reached the office of Barrington Thurd. They saw the general manager, who assured them that Barrington Thurd had not been seen there that morning. All the clerks were equally certain, when questioned, that Thurd had not arrived. It was his custom to appear in the office promptly at nine, and there had been general comment at his lateness.

"Have you looked in his private office?" suddenly inquired Imro Fox.

No, they had not. The door, marked "Barrington Thurd, Private," opened off of a railed enclosure near to that of the general manager, who said that no one in the place possessed a duplicate key to the room. The door was closed. Imro Fox turned to Frank Morton, the chauffeur, and asked if he knew if his master kept duplicate keys at home. Morton replied that in his five years of service in the family he had never heard of any.

"Perhaps it isn't locked," suggested Imro Fox.

He walked up to the door and turned the knob. It gave beneath his grip and the door opened. And as Dr. Cleft stepped inside, Imro Fox closed the door and locked it. The two men were confronting a strange sight.

Strapped and roped to his easy desk chair sat Barrington Thurd in the last stages of acute exhaustion. His face was pale as a sheet, and the muscles of his face were twitching, his eyes were rolling, his mouth was open, and only gurgling sounds came from his throat.

Before him on the desk lay scraps of food and three tumblers, one of them empty, the two others filled with water.

At sight of his rescuers, Thurd gave a groan and fainted dead away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DOOR WAS LOCKED, BUT——

IF the frightful experience through which Barrington Thurd had passed had been intended to chasten his spirit, it had just the opposite effect.

Propped up in the easy-chair of his library, three hours after Imro Fox and Dr. Cleft had come upon him, and feeling very much better after receiving stimulants and medical attention, the financier glowered at the familiar furnishings of his room like an infuriated bull. His small eyes blinked viciously, his lower lip protruded pugnaciously, and he snorted savagely.

"I'd like to know who did it!" he growled, for the hundredth time.

"But you seem to forget," said Imro Fox, "that neither Dr. Cleft nor myself as yet know what was done to you. You were too weak on the journey home, and since the physician has gone, you have done nothing but revile against your troubles. What happened?"

Thurd leaned forward, banging his thick fists angrily on the arms of his chair.

"It is my custom always," he said, making an obvious effort to control his feelings, "to be the last to leave my office on Saturday afternoons. My reason is that I like to go over the books quietly; sometimes a study of a week's transactions is illuminating. I was there alone on Saturday, sitting at my desk, when I was suddenly attacked.

"Before I could grasp what was happening, a thick bag was thrown over my head, and two men, or rather what seemed to be a man and a boy, threw themselves upon me with the utmost violence. I was thrown to the floor, with one of my assailants on top. I struck out blindly, and kicked and squirmed, and we rolled over and over across the floor, upsetting a small telephone desk in the scramble. But I could not see what I was doing, and in a very few moments I was overpowered and trussed up in the chair as you found me. But that was only the beginning of my troubles.

"For a long time I sat there, breathing hard, and wondering what was going on. I could hear the two bandits moving about, the clink of glasses, and the rattle of paper, as if packages were being opened. In my dazed state, I could not make the faintest guess as to what they were doing. But I was soon to find out.

"I suppose I had been sitting there in my helpless state for fifteen minutes, blinded, and gagged and bound, before they lifted that hood from my head. I was facing my desk, with my back to the door, and my two assailants were just leaving, closing the door behind them. I heard the key turn in the lock, and I knew that I was a prisoner.

"I waited to see if they would return, but as another fifteen minutes dragged by, I felt sure that I was safe. Then a perfectly simple plan of relief occurred to me. There was my telephone; I could easily summon assistance. For some reason which I could not understand, one of my arms was very loosely bandaged; the others were done with the most workmanlike precision. I easily freed my left hand; the other and my feet I could not budge.

"Lashed to my heavy office chair as I was, I managed to drag myself slowly across the floor until I reached the fallen telephone. Here another great difficulty confronted me; the phone was on the floor, and I was tied to a chair, and it was only by superhuman maneuvering that I finally was able to get that phone on my knees. But I got it there. Then I tried to get central; tried, without success, clicking the receiver hook and yelling myself hoarse. The phone was dead.

"Then I realized the predicament in which I was placed. Ours is what is called a "P. B. X."—a private branch exchange, and we have two operators. All the lines are plugged dead on Saturday, and there is no night or holiday connection. I was a prisoner in my own office until Monday morning.

"While in the throes of mental anguish at the first realization of this damnable project, I noticed for the first time

the array of objects left on the table by the men who had overpowered me. There were three tumblers of drinking water, and a cardboard platter on which was spread a large quantity of chip beef, some pretzels and bread. In my heart I thanked them for this little consideration, anyway.

"But what a ghastly mockery! I ate those things and tried to drink that water. My friends, that water was salt water—it was a dastardly scheme—a coldly sketched, fiendishly prepared plan—my thirst first irritated by salted meats and salted pretzels—and then—when I sought to assuage it with water, I found nothing but mockery—nothing but undrinkable stuff. No shipwrecked mariner on a desert island could have suffered more than I."

Was it imagination—or did that grisly laughter come through the curtains just then? Barrington Thurd heard it—or imagined that he did. Dr. Cleft had the same fancy, and glanced furtively from the financier to Imro Fox. But the latter's face was impassive. It was as if he had heard nothing.

The financier shuddered and shook himself free from his dreadful memories.

"I passed through hell," he continued, more calmly. "It seemed to me the hours would never end. But at last came the morning of Monday and with it business in my office was resumed. Of course I could have summoned immediate assistance then, but my pride would not let me. I could not be found by my own employees in such a condition. So I telephoned, and I am rather surprised that you had difficulty in finding me; that some one did not know I was about the place, inasmuch as I gave the number to one of my own operators and she knew the call was coming from my private office."

"Excuse me," intercepted Imro Fox, just managing to head off a storm of consoling phrases from the stricken Dr. Cleft, "but that is not so important. The telephone girl attached no significance to the matter and she was not consulted when we came in and inquired for you. There was one thing infinitely more surprising than anything else that you have related."

"What was that?" asked the puzzled Thurd.

"You said your assailants locked your door?"

"Unquestionably they did, Mr. Fox. I dragged myself to that door and exerted all my efforts to open it without avail."

Imro Fox sat pensive for a moment, as if considering a delicate problem.

"And yet," he reminded him, "when Dr. Cleft and I got there this morning your door was unlocked. We just walked right in!"

The three men stared at each other in silence. There was a bewildered hopelessness on the face of Barrington Thurd. Dr. Cleft was white and there was a frightened look in his eyes.

No man could have read the meaning of the face of Imro Fox

CHAPTER EIGHT

SCREAMS AND WHISPERS

BARRINGTON THURD interrupted the silence by requesting that he be excused any further questioning just then, and that his sister be sent to him at once.

Imro Fox, mildly astonished, promptly withdrew to his room, while Dr. Cleft went on a still hunt for the mistress of the Thurd establishment. No arrangement could have suited the investigator more. He did not want Dr. Cleft near him now, nor any one else for that matter. He wanted to be alone.

It was well on toward the lunch hour, but Fox had no mind for eating. This latest development had been a stunning surprise. It showed that the malignant attitude of the preposterous whispering head was no idle threat; that behind its sinister gabblings was human force of a peculiarly malevolent and ferocious kind. The detective wanted time to think things over.

In all the darkness of the mystery, he had seen one glimmer of light, and it was growing brighter moment after moment.

"Why, any one should be able to see that," he said to himself. "What a dunce I was, not to have thought of it before. Everything seems to dovetail into it. If only Brad has gotten busy now——"

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door, and when the door was opened it revealed Neb Noots with a long, white envelope of familiar appearance in his hand.

"Dis jest come fo' yo', Mistah Fox," he said, bowing gravely.

"Thank you, Neb. Is the messenger waiting for an answer?"

"Yassuh!"

"Then just remain here until I glance over this matter."

The investigator tore open the envelope and drew out two enclosures. One was a photograph, in the familiar style of the Rogue's Gallery, showing a man's face in full and in profile. The other was a folded sheet of paper, on the outside of which appeared the inscription of a court of law.

It was the photograph which first engaged the detective's attention, and he studied it with hawk-like eyes. He held it away from him, at first one angle and then another. He got up and went over to the window that he might see it better.

"It's him!" he murmured softly. There was actually a little emotional thrill running through the system of this cold, calculating scientific detective, who was not believed by his most intimate friends to be a man of any emotions whatsoever. "And yet how he has changed. There is the same settled look about the eyes; the same determination of the chin, and yet all the other characteristics of the countenance have changed. What under heaven could have changed a man like that? Could it be—could it——"

He paused, astonished at his own inspiration. Could the fantastic idea that had just sparkled and danced across his mind like a streak of lightning have a foundation in fact? Why not? He had learned one thing from a study of that skull's formation. He had learned another from one volume of the "Encyclopedia Britannica." And it was true that at one particular point in the narrative of Barrington Thurd downstairs in the library a few hours before, there had come from behind those curtains the whispering, ghoulish laugh they had learned to associate with a skull.

"Neb," said Imro Fox severely, "I haven't opened this slip of paper yet. I've been too busy looking at this photograph and talking to myself. But I'm going to look at it now. And, Neb, if this bit of paper has on it what I think it has, then all the curious oddities of this experiment will have been explained and I shall have won a real victory."

"Yas, suh!" answered Nebuchadnezzar Noots, who had not the remotest idea what the great investigator was talking about.

With a slow smile, Imro Fox spread open the paper which had accompanied the photograph. It was a transcript from a court record of seventeen years before, and

it recited all the facts and circumstances surrounding the adoption of Helen West, aged one year and six months, by Barrington Thurd and his sister Emilie, and the permission of the court that her name be changed to Helen Thurd.

"Helen West!" breathed Imro Fox triumphantly. "I've won! The whispering head will never——"

He stopped, arrested by a most extraordinary sound. It was a woman's high pitched scream, and it rose higher and higher, as if in mortal agony. The sound came from below.

Thrusting the frightened Neb Noots aside, Imro Fox rushed down the stairs. As he gained the first landing, he saw Villafranca running down the corridor, in the direction away from the library door. Before the detective had reached the first floor, he saw Dr. Cleft appear at the other end of the corridor, glancing wildly about him and demanding incoherently to be told what was the matter. The screams grew louder and more fearful every moment.

As Imro Fox flung himself down the corridor toward the library door, an apparition came suddenly before him, and the screaming abruptly ended. It was the figure of Emilie Thurd, more dead than alive. Her tongue was moving helplessly, as if she could scream no more. Blood was flowing from a cut on her cheek; her hands were held tragically above her head, and her eyes were raised toward the ceiling. The detective caught her by the shoulders.

"What is it? What is wrong, Miss Emilie?" he demanded.

She fell to the floor in a swoon, a low moan being the only sound that came from her lips. Helen Thurd came running from a distant room, and knelt beside her. Marian Holmes and her father, and the servants gathered, one after the other, in an excited, chattering group, all suggesting different remedies and asking the same questions.

But Imro Fox did not remain. He strode quickly down the hall and put his hand on the door of the library. As he did so, a strange sound met his ears.

Distinctly he heard the heavy bolt shot into place, and the key turned in the lock. The key was withdrawn.

And then, through the keyhole, came the devilish laugh again—the whispering laughter of the talking head.

CHAPTER NINE

A STRANGE DEED

As Fox stepped back, they were just carrying the unconscious form of Emilie Thurd to her room. He raised his hand, and by an imperative glance, impressed the men in the corridor that he had something of grave importance to communicate.

They crowded around him and he briefly explained the situation.

"Something has happened of a very serious nature," he said quickly. "We cannot wait until Miss Emilie recovers unconsciousness to learn what has gone wrong. Barrington Thurd is in danger, and I am frank enough to say that the man has enemies who would not scruple to take his life. Someone has just bolted that door. We have got to get in. I propose to demand admission to the room, and if we do not get a reply, that we smash our way in."

The mild-mannered Edgerton Holmes ventured to suggest that they wait a while before doing anything so heroic. Perhaps, after all, it were not so serious. Dr. Cleft sent Neb Noots after an axe, and Villafranca, who suddenly joined the company, agreed most enthusiastically that the door should be battered down.

"Our dear friend—he may be in danger—we must act at once," he said, as if the idea were his own suggestion, and so, outnumbered and out-voted, Mr. Holmes agreed that it might be just as well.

Imro Fox immediately took command of the party, and led the way back to the barred and bolted library door. He rapped loudly on the heavy oaken panel.

In breathless silence they waited for the voice of Barrington Thurd. But no answer came; behind the door all was as still and silent as a tomb. Again Fox knocked, louder and longer than he had sounded before, and the echoes of it were reflected with a dreary sound up and down the long corridor.

"Mr. Thurd! Are you in that room?"

Fox's voice was sharp and peremptory, with more than a hint of threat in it. Yet he might have been addressing the stolid door itself, for all the answer that came.

"Look! For God's sake look!" cried Dr. Cleft, his teeth chattering in a very excess of horror.

They drew back in consternation, and gazed where his shaking finger pointed—at the keyhole of the door.

A shadow blotted out the light through the keyhole. Imro Fox knelt and put his eye close to the aperture.

There was an eye looking at him from the other side of the door. It was staring straight at him with a set, intense kind of gaze, and it batted its lid and blinked like an angry imp. It was such a fiery, hideous eye that it might have served well for the bony socket of the mysterious skull.

"Yeah's dat axe!" boomed the voice of Neb Noots.

Fox grabbed it from his hand. Dr. Cleft took another, for the thoughtful negro had brought two. It was a narrow corridor, and the party scattered, while Fox, lifting the axe over his head, brought it down with a mighty crash upon the heavy panel. The blade made a long, white gash in the woodwork, and the whole door quivered beneath the blow, but it did not yield.

"Surround the house," yelled Imro Fox. "They may escape through the library or bedroom windows."

Villafranca and Neb Noots rushed down the corridor, as Dr. Cleft brought his axe against the door with all his strength. Blow after blow they struck, alternating, but their task was no easy one. The house had been built staunchly, and those doors were meant to last. With all their strength they beat against it, the sound of the axes echoing throughout the house, until at last Imro Fox delivered the mortal blow.

With a rending, tearing sound, the splintering of wood, and the groan of broken hinges, the great door fell inward, crashing to the floor. The detective leaped across the wreckage into the room, followed by Dr. Cleft, while Edgerton Holmes remained prudently at the doorway.

On the floor lay the body of Barrington Thurd. It needed one glance from the experienced Imro Fox to tell that he was dead.

The curtains that hung between the library and the bedroom had been torn down and lay on the floor in a heap. Through the doorway they could see the whispering head.

It was rocking and rattling back and forth as if in a very transport of demoniac mirth.

CHAPTER TEN

FOUND IN CONCEALMENT

"DR. CLEFT," said Imro Fox sternly, "I wish you would summon every member of this house, from Miss Emilie Thurd down to the humblest kitchen maid,

and bring them here at once. I want no delays. This matter demands extraordinarily quick action."

Villafranca, returning from outside, thrust himself forward belligerently, his dark eyes flaming, his lips quivering with indignation.

"By what authority?" he demanded. "Who are you, Mr. Algernon Smeeth, or whatever it is your name may be, that you should order us about? What are you here any more than what we, the others, are? Don't you know that Miss Emilie is ver' seek? You cannot call her to witness a scene like this. I protest, if no one else will—I think it is insult! By what authority, I repeat?"

Imro Fox was in no mood then to bandy words with an excitable Costa Rican banana planter.

"By this authority," he cried angrily, throwing back his coat and exposing a small gold star. "And if that isn't enough, I'll find a way to keep you quiet in less than than you think. My real name is Imro Fox. I am a detective. Ladies and gentlemen, shocking as it may sound, there has been murder done here, under the most mysterious circumstances. So far as the law is concerned, no one here is considered guilty, but no one is free from suspicion until the entire circumstances have been investigated. There is an unusual feature to this case which makes it imperative that something be done at once. I know enough to be absolutely positive of that. So I must request that you accept my orders unqualifiedly, and that you give me every cooperation within your power."

At the sight of the investigator's gold badge of office, a low murmur ran around the guests. Villafranca, with a stifled snarl, drew back, and gazed upon the detective with ill-concealed rage. But when Imro Fox insisted that they all stand together in the back part of the library, Villafranco took his place with the rest, though he was muttering vindictive things in Spanish. Fox waited until all were gathered in the room together; the stolid butler, the hysterical house maids, and finally Miss Emilie herself, very faint, and very weak, but with a defiant glare in her eyes that the investigator knew foreshadowed obstinacy when he came down to questioning her.

Neb Noots, who brought up the rear, was dispatched to search throughout the house for any other person that might have been overlooked. While he was gone, Fox directed the library door be put in place again, but warned Dr. Cleft, who was proving a cool and capable assistant in this emergency, not to touch the bolt. Fox remembered that the bolt had been shot by some unseen person a few moments before, and he hoped a tell-tale finger-print might have been left on its surface.

"Now, my friends," said Fox impressively, "I must request most emphatically that each one of you remain absolutely quiet while I make the examination which is necessary at this moment. I mean by that that not one of you shall so much as whisper anything to any one else in the room. Any violation of this rule will subject the offender to immediate arrest. I am sure that no one here wishes the publicity of riding to the police station in an auto patrol. I am giving you these instructions explicitly now so that there may be no misunderstanding, if any of them are disregarded." Imro Fox sank beside the body of the man who had asked him to come to his house, and a pang of disappointment went through him that he had been unable to save the man from his horrible end. At first glance, there was nothing to show what had caused the death of the financier. He lay on his back, his puffed face turned a darker red, his eyes wide open, staring balefully at the rose-tinted ceiling. There was no blood to mark a wound of blade or bullet, and as he sniffed at the dead lips, the detective could find no immediate evidences of poison. Nor was there any bottle or vial or paper near by from which a poison might have been taken. For a moment Imro Fox was puzzled. But presently he saw a tiny red swelling behind the right ear. With a little grunt of satisfaction he bent over to examine it more closely. What he saw there told a graphic story.

There was a fine abrasion there, not much larger than a pin point, but reddened and made more prominent by a slight swelling. It had been inflicted by some instrument with a point of almost incredible sharpness, and there was not the slightest doubt in the mind of Imro Fox that the tip of the weapon had been dipped in poison.

"Most likely a poison dart," he said to himself. "Now, where did it go to?"

On his knees he crept around the body, searching every inch of space of the carpet. His search was not destined to go unrewarded. Presently he swooped down on a short, arrow-like thing, with its sharp point red with blood. His eyes dancing in cold triumph, the detective clambered to his feet and held out the gruesome thing.

"It was with this, ladies and gentlemen," he said sternly, "that Mr. Barrington Thurd was killed. It is a favorite weapon in the barbarous islands of the Southern seas. If any one present has ever been down that way, he or she may be familiar with their use by the savages of that land."

A shudder ran through all those present, but no one replied. Fox now hurried into the bedroom, where those grouped in the library heard him opening cupboards, bureau drawers, and cabinets, and once they saw him lift up the skull and examine it closely. Then they saw him put down the head, and pull out again the top of the bureau drawers. They saw him run his hand around inside and withdraw it, chuckling in a threatening kind of grim satisfaction. Then, to their astonishment, he found the key to the drawers and locked them all with the greatest care.

Fox now had the body removed, the curtains replaced and the room set in order.

Fox now began a crossexamination of all those in the room. He was just beginning to grill Emilie Thurd when there came a rap at the door.

"Mistuh Fox," cried the excited Neb, forgetting the detective's alias, "I'se found somebody hiding in the kitchen."

Dr. Cleft opened the door. Noots stood there, holding firmly Carter Hemmenway, the lover of Helen.

But Fox did not permit this incident to halt his work. Telling Hemmenway he would deal with him later, he resumed his questioning. And in the next half an hour, by dint of hard struggling against lying and evasion, he had established the following:

Emilie Thurd admitted that her brother had treated her cruelly and that in that last interview he had struck her. Finally she confessed that for many years she had held a certain paper over his head, and thus forced him to support her. To-day she had finally surrendered that paper, and he had then cast her out. She refused to tell what the document contained.

Villafranca confessed that he had invested his capital heavily in Thurd's enterprises; that he had received no return, and that he had quarreled with him because he had believed himself swindled. But he swore he had not killed Thurd.

Mild little Edgerton Holmes furnished a surprise. Under Fox's relentless questioning, he finally admitted that he had placed some of his bank's funds in Thurd's enterprises; that he feared he had been swindled, and that if it were true, he was a ruined man.

Carter Hemmenway was confronted with all the threats

and intimidations Fox had overheard in the garden. Though amazed, he admitted them. He said he had stolen in to see Helen and was waiting in the kitchen for her because he had heard servants say there was trouble in the house.

Fox's next question was never asked.

There was a sudden swish and the curtains between library and bedroom were suddenly drawn together.

Imro Fox whirled around, as cries and screams came from the group gathered before him. Through an aperture between the hangings a hand had been thrust, and in the hand was a blue-steeled automatic. It was levelled at the detective.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HIDDEN MAN.

"STAND back!" cried an iron voice behind the curtain. It rang like a clarion, in imperative command. The hand holding the revolver swept in a steady semi-circle back and forth, covering every man and woman in the room.

"Make but a single move and I'll fire!" cried the voice again. It had an oddly familiar ring, yet there was but one soul in the library that placed it. And that man was Imro Fox. After one glance at the revolver, he turned his back to it and confronted the people he had been interrogating.

"I have been expecting this," he cried coolly.

A strange silence followed. The steady hand remained levelled with its sinister weapon pointed, and then a deep sigh sounded on the stillness.

"Barrington Thurd was not murdered!" suddenly boomed the voice. "He was killed in combat, when he was about to slay another man. The laws of this land might send his executioner to the electric chair. That is why I am holding you all at bay now. Not one of you shall suffer, if you remain quiet—until the man who killed Barrington Thurd has escaped."

A murmur of surprise, almost of gratification, ran through the group of guests, members of the family and servants. But who was the man behind those hangings? And what relation had he to the whispering skull? And what relation had it to all this weird and strange affair?

These questions were racing through the minds of all of them. Only Imro Fox seemed unmoved. In the face of apparent defeat, with the real criminal getting away from him, he stood there, smiling and serene, juggling his sphinx-headed watch charm, the gleam of a mysterious satisfaction in his eyes.

"Who can it——" began Dr. Cleft, who began to find the silence disconcerting. But he was never to finish the question. In the room beyond the curtains they heard a new sound.

There was a sudden thumping and banging, and inarticulate cries, in a low whisper, together with a clicking sound that brought the pallor of terror to the cheeks of Dr. Cleft.

"The skull!" he cried. "Good heavens, the skull again!"

No one but Imro Fox knew what he was talking about. But to the investigator, it was entirely plain that Dr. Cleft had spoken the truth. The sounds were made by the skull; the clicking was the clicking of its teeth, and the rattling, the sound of its bones as it rocked back and forth across the dresser top. And the inarticulate cries of distress were in the whisper that they had come to associate with the talking skull.

The slow smile of triumph on the face of Imro Fox deepened. The hand holding the automatic seemed to waver. The indecision of the man behind the curtains seemed to communicate itself to those in the library; they stirred restlessly, wondering what was going to happen.

Imro Fox knew perfectly well what was the matter. He had counted on this very situation arising. And he knew that the man behind the curtains would be hard put to it to remedy the solution.

But to this day Imro Fox will testify to his admiration for the cleverness and daring with which the man actually solved the puzzle trap which the investigator had contrived for him. For a second the hand holding the revolver was withdrawn. The voice of the man boomed out in a string of outlandish words which no one present, not even Imro Fox, understood. Then there was a deafening, terrifying roar—the automatic weapon was discharged.

The odor of burned powder came to them, and wisps of smoke crept beneath the curtains. Almost immediately the hand holding the revolver reappeared.

"I congratulate you, Imro Fox," cried the hidden man. "It was a rare bit of work for you to turn that lock. But I have risked my companion's life and blown away the lock from the woodwork with a bullet. I have always been rated a crack shot, Mr. Fox!"

"Very clever!" conceded the investigator keenly. "But the honors are yet to be made even."

A creaking sound now came from beyond the curtains, and then the fall of something light on the floor. The patter of running footsteps came to them, then another moment of silence, and then the sound of a chair being dragged across the floor.

They glanced at one another—these puzzled, care-worn people—even in their troubles, wondering what was passing behind the screen of those shielding draperies. They heard some one fumbling at the window-catch; then a grunt, and then the window being raised. What followed happened quickly.

There was a brief pause of quiet, and then a shout.

"What de debbil am dat?"

It was Neb Noots's voice outside the window. A fierce scream like the cry of a wild animal rose on the air, and then a roar of wrath from the negro. At the same moment a mighty curse came from the man behind the curtains, and the revolver disappeared.

That was the moment for which the smiling Imro Fox had been waiting. He leaped forward, all his strength concentrated in that jump, and thrust himself through the curtains. Before him loomed a man, rushing toward an open window, before which stood a chair. The chair was in his way, and he had to stop to thrust it aside.

That moment of delay was fatal to his entire enterprise. Before he could reach the window and save his fleeing companion from the mighty grip of the black man, Imro Fox was upon him. He landed on the broad shoulders of the man, and bore him to the floor.

Those in the library, crowding to the door, gazed upon a mighty struggle, a fierce, long drawn battle. Fox was lithe and strong, but he was matched against a man of amazing cunning and resource, of huge strength and determination. Across the floor they rolled, fighting for the smallest advantage, Imro Fox holding the neck of his antagonist while the other rained blows against his face and chest. They panted and grew breathless, but the struggle went on.

They neared the window, with Fox on top, but a moment later he was below, and the other trying to use his temporary advantage. The next instant the detective had caught the leg of his opponent and twisted it with a jiu-

jitsu swing that sent him sprawling to one side. Before the man could recover he had leaped upon him, just missing a vicious blow from the right, and sat upon his chest.

Even then the man struggled and squirmed with all the ferocity of a wild man. It required every ounce of strength the detective possessed to hold him prisoner. But at last, after a desperate struggle, he pinioned him fast, and a moment later a pair of steel bracelets were on the wrists of his captive.

Then, panting, flushed and almost breathless, he arose to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he gasped, "I take pleasure in introducing you to Arthur West, a man sought for by the police for seventeen years. He is also the gentleman who invented what history will probably call the whispering head. He will tell us all about the murder of Barrington Thurd."

Then, for the first time, the shocked group at the doorway realized who it was he had overpowered.

They were looking at Frank Morton, the chauffeur.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SECRET OF THE WHISPERING SKULL.

IMRO FOX walked over to the window.

"Take your prisoner into the kitchen and keep him there until I call for you," he shouted to Neb Noots. "Watch out for him—he's a dangerous fellow," he added. Then he turned and addressed his prostrate captive.

"Mr. West," he said politely, "I am very sorry to have done this. You yourself made it necessary. I would have had it otherwise. I know far more of all these matters than you imagine. If you will tell your whole story, here and now, before I call for the regular police, it may be possible that something can be done that will save the entire situation."

A look of unbelief crossed the face of the prisoner. He looked up into the kindly eyes of the detective, and then slowly, humbly rose to his feet.

"It will purge my soul," he said sadly, "if I rid it of its intolerable burden. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' I should have remembered that. Mr. Fox, if you will ask Mr. Thurd's daughter"—he spoke those last three words with obvious difficulty—"to leave the room I shall be glad to tell you all that I know."

Imro Fox gazed at Helen Thurd, and with a little wondering glance about her she slowly withdrew. Edgerton Holmes sent a rather disappointed Marian Holmes after her, for Marian, for all her friendship, would have liked to have stayed and heard the story.

They all moved back into the library and found the places they had occupied before the last few exciting events which had resulted in the capture of Frank Morton, whose real name Imro Fox had declared to be Arthur West.

The man swallowed hard before he spoke. Obviously he was making a desperate effort to control his feelings.

"My name is Arthur West," he said soberly. "Eighteen years ago I think I was the happiest man in the world. I was a junior clerk in one of the largest jewelry stores in New York City. I had the dearest woman that the breath of life was ever breathed into as my wife.

"Barrington Thurd was working in the store in my department. I was his boss.

"Jewels began to disappear from the store. I consulted with the heads of the firm, and we decided to watch closely, in the hope of catching the guilty man. I found him. It was Barrington Thurd.

"It was late in the afternoon, and all the heads of the firm were gone. I made him sign a paper, admitting his theft, and he promised that he would come to my rooms that night and return the gems. He did not come, however, but telephoned me, saying he was afraid to make the journey; that they might be stolen from him. He asked me to come and get them; then, if I lost them, he would not be blamed, and as my record was clear, I would not be suspected. I went to his home, still carrying his confession in my pocket.

"I walked straight into a trap which he, by his association with gamblers, had been able to prepare. I was overpowered, carried out a back way into a cab, and drugged. When I woke up I was in the hold of a ship, miles out at sea. I had been shanghaied.

"He had done a diabolical thing. To all intents and purposes in the eyes of my firm and the police, and soon of the world, I was a fugitive, having stolen gems. Of course, when I disappeared, it was at once assumed that I was the thief. And that stain clings to my name to this very day.

"God only knows my sufferings for the next eleven years.

"At last the hour of my deliverance came. My ship was 1,600 miles north of Australia when a storm hit it and we were wrecked. All hands went down except myself, and I was cast ashore by a miracle and landed more dead than alive. I was on one of the Sandwich Islands, thrown among hostile savages.

"But I lived.

"I made friends with the savages, and for a long time I lived as one of them. I practised their religion, and it was there that I first saw the whispering skull. It is used by their priests in some of their religious rites. It gave me an idea.

"At last the day of my deliverance came. A ship stopped at the islands, and took me aboard with one of the sacred skulls of the tribe, and something else. Within a year I was back in New York, and with the shortage of men created by the war industries, it was not difficult for me to secure a position as Barrington Thurd's chauffeur.

"But what did I find when I returned? Enough to harden my heart even more against the man. My dear wife had died, her heart broken at my supposed disgrace. And, to my horror, my own daughter, the child of my martyred wife, had been adopted by this beast.

"Later I learned the reason for this. The struggle in Barrington Thurd's home on the night I had been overpowered had been heard by his sister, Miss Emilie. She had charged him with his crime, and by a woman's trick had gotten the confession from him. And she had made him make amends by adopting my little orphaned girl, and held that paper as a protection against his brutality.

"I did not put my plan of operation into effect until last week. And he, like a coward, at once ran to a detective.

"To-day I overheard—for I have had a secret witness watching over Barrington Thurd—the skull could hear as well as whisper—a conversation in which Thurd told his sister of the torments to which he had been subjected. He confessed to her what he probably would not tell the detective—that he suspected I was back to bring him to justice, whether it was in the flesh or in the spirit the coward was afraid to guess. He begged her to return the confession to him which she had kept all these years. As she told you a little while ago, he did, and he

drove her with blows and curses from the room. When he turned around I was confronting him.

"He knew me then. And he leered at me like a fiend. He had done what I had not known; he had prepared in the last few days against the hour of my coming. And before I knew it he had a knife at my heart, and was lunging toward me. Taken unawares, I know I should have been killed, and he could have exposed my identity and gone scot free. But my hidden witness was too quick for him. In the defense of my life, he killed Barrington Thurd. And that hidden witness is——"

Before he could finish the door opened, and Helen West rushed across the floor. Driven by her feelings which impelled her strongly toward this man, she had hidden outside the door and listened. Now she came up to him, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"My father!" she cried brokenly. "My dear father! You've suffered so much. Now I know why I've felt so near to you!"

The strong man weakened at the sight of her. He had meant to bear his burden alone. But now she flung her arms about him, and her hands smoothed his cheeks, and brushed away his wayward tears.

Meanwhile Imro Fox had disappeared. Presently he came back to the doorway, holding something tight, with Neb Noots bringing up the rear.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "let me introduce to you the modus operandi of the whispering head."

He was holding a wriggling, squirming creature, not quite three feet high, a dwarf, who was chattering volubly, fiercely, protestingly, in a jargon no one understood. And he spoke in a whisper!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE RIDDLE'S SOLUTION.

MR. CLEFT leaned forward beseechingly, looking into the calm face of Imro Fox. All the guests and members of the family had gone their several ways from the room. The library door again was closed, and in the room of mystery and tragedy there remained only the investigator, Dr. Cleft, Arthur West—and the wild-eyed dwarf.

The latter was exceedingly small, but was dressed in man's clothing. His face was a fierce, dark brown, and his eyes were large and savage. He kept his gaze fastened on Imro Fox, and his manner, as he sat ill at ease in one of the large library chairs, was apprehensive.

"Dr. Cleft's questions echo my own heart," confessed Arthur West. "I thought I had devised something which no man can solve."

"Can't be done," returned Imro Fox brightly. His manner was not at all the pose he assumed in addressing a criminal. There was actually a friendly ring in it. "There is very little to be said, but I must confess that you were under suspicion in my own mind from the very outset. I worked on the case something like this:

"My examination of the skull and its brain capacity which I determined by a plaster model, convinced me that it was of a savage from the South Sea Islands—thanks to my knowledge of that particular branch of science. So there was one clue in my hands in the very beginning. What directed my thoughts to you was the note in the skull's jaws, which I found while it was in my rooms. When I made that plaster cast it was not there. Then I went to the telephone and called the police captain. When I came back the note was there. Somebody had put it there. Who?

"Certainly not Thurd himself. You were all homeward bound by that time. But it must have been some one who came with you in the machine and had remained behind. Therefore, one of you must have connived in the trick. At the very outset I was inclined to believe that the responsibility lay between Dr. Cleft and yourself. From what has since happened I believe that you brought the dwarf with you, hidden in the automobile, and that he slipped into my room at the first convenient opportunity and later made his escape."

"That is correct," confessed Arthur West. "The good fellow hid in one of your Japanese vases for hours, and escaped after you were all asleep."

"My suspicions," continued Imro Fox, "were pointed still more directly at you, when you were late in meeting me at the train. As a matter of fact, that looked very much out of the way to me. Of course, you were just back from making Thurd a prisoner in his office. And once I really suspected you, things began to point your way very clearly. For instance, when I was shown into Thurd's bedroom, I determined to see if I could get the skull to talk. I went upstairs for it, and as I returned you saw me. You were talking with Senor Villafranca, and I saw you move away as I passed. Then, when I went back into the bedroom the skull talked at once. That was another straw.

"But, of course, this proved nothing; it was necessary for me to make you trap yourself, and that I very early determined to do. The mystery of the talking skull was still to be explained. I made a very thorough examination, and I came finally to the conclusion that the only way it could be done was by some one able to hide in a very small space—a conclusion which led me irresistibly to examine the bureau itself. And there I found much.

"I found that there was a means of escaping from the top bureau drawer into the wall and out into the back garden. My first suspicion came when I felt a cool breeze, just after the skull had talked. Something had been opened somewhere. But when I drew out the drawer it was apparently an innocent arrangement. But after tinkering with it I saw that it was cleverly hinged at the rear; that the door in the wall was hidden by wainscoting, and on my examination of the exterior I saw that the opening through the wall had also been carefully camouflaged. You had done your job well.

"But you had been too clever. You had fixed your hinges back of the drawer so that if the drawer were drawn out the back was rigid and the hinges concealed. So long as the drawer was unlocked nothing was discernible. But when the drawer was closed and locked the back of the drawer could be opened—and your dwarf could get in.

"From that point it was easy to reason how the skull was operated. In examining it I found in it a bit of fallen plaster which gave me the clue. In the upper part of the head a bit of steel had been affixed and covered by plaster. The jaws were hinged. Using a powerful but small electro-magnet the dwarf could cause the head to fall back and then come forward, by simply operating the magnet. The same thing is used in vaudeville to-day by entertainers. Is that correct?

"It is," admitted Arthur West. "In the South Sea Islands they use a fine hair tied to the teeth, the hair being invisible. I learned the trick from a theatrical man on shipboard. I had intended using the hair."

"I found a bit of broken plaster clinging to its jaws," continued Imro Fox. "I suspected that either a dwarf or a small boy was concerned. When I read of the South Sea

COMING! COMING! COMING!

Something new and interesting

WATCH THIS PAGE WEEK AFTER NEXT

We will have an announcement about

"MARY'S ANKLE"

Perhaps this mystifies you. Are you curious about it?
Our next number will explain the matter.

Watch this page

Island dwarfs and remembered the South Sea Island skull I began to feel that I was getting warm.

"Then came the adventure of Thurd being held prisoner in his office. The meaning of his ordeal was not hard to seek. Certainly the motive was revenge. Then why this means of revenge? Most probably poetic justice. Some one had been in the South Seas, had endured the agonies of burning thirst, probably because of Barrington Thurd, and was determined to make him suffer all that himself. The clues were dovetailing nicely.

"But I had still stronger confirmatory evidence. Quite casually I had been watching you, and if you remember I particularly requested you to come up with us when we went to Thurd's office. My object was to watch your reaction when we found him. Why you took it to yourself to unlock the door I can't imagine. I saw you do it."

"I did it to puzzle you all the more," said West. "I made a bitter mess of the job."

"But I am anticipating," continued Imro Fox. "I had gotten certain facts from my friends at headquarters which sent me off on another tack. I read about your disappearance and the missing gems. I also read of the adoption of the girl baby in the same year. Why, I asked myself, did Barrington Thurd, of all men in the world, adopt a baby? And when I learned from the court records that the child was the daughter of the missing Arthur West, I began to get excited. At the same time I had sent for a photograph of Arthur West. I recognized you at once, for all that you had changed. And dimly the motive began to stir in my mind.

"Before I could make a move, however, I heard the screaming downstairs, and you know what followed. Before we broke down the door I had it fairly well figured out what had happened. You had escaped through the window before we got in, but fearing the dwarf might arouse questions if seen, you hid him again in the drawer, meaning for him to clear out when it was safer. And I suppose you carried with you the document and Thurd's knife."

"They are in my pocket," said West.

"My first move," continued the detective, "was to unlock the bureau drawer. I knew that by that I had blocked the escape of your dwarf, I could have dragged him out, but it was my purpose to make you show your hand. I knew you would try to rescue him, and for that reason I mercilessly hammered at these innocent people. I saw you slip out when Carter Hemmenway was brought in, and in the confusion no one else noticed it. I could have called you back, but you were doing exactly what I wanted you to do. You climbed into the bedroom from the outside and covered us with your revolver.

"As soon as you had gone I sent my faithful Neb Noots to guard the window, and the rest you know. The dwarf, instead of escaping through the wall, in his confusion, ran to you after you fired. Then came the final mix-up."

There was a somber silence for a moment, and then Arthur West spoke.

"I wish I had let him alone," he cried. "See what my plan to make him feel a part of what he caused me has brought me to."

"You meant him no harm," the detective said kindly. "You were seeking to reduce him to the point where your position before the world would be vindicated. And he was killed when he was attempting your life. I am sure that when I appear before the coroner's jury all will be well."

The two men clasped hands.

"As for this savage creature, what are you going to do with him—if he is released?" asked Imro Fox anxiously.

"He has been pleading to go back," said Arthur West. "He has studied hard, memorizing all the things he has whispered through the bureau keyhole, as the words of the skull itself. He loves his wild animals. I am going to send him home."

"Do it soon," said Imro Fox.

Arthur West was acquitted, and the facts of his innocence of the seventeen-year-old jewel robbery published far and wide. He gave his daughter in marriage to Carter Hemmenway at as pretty a ceremony as you ever looked at. Barrington Thurd had died a vastly wealthy man, having hoarded money in secret investments—sufficient to repay Senor Villafranca, Edgerton Holmes and many others like them.

Dr. Cleft regards Imro Fox as a hero. Every once in a while he is allowed to visit Imro Fox at Mystic Towers. By the blazing hearth logs they sat and discussed transcendentalism and heaven knows what else.

And there let us leave them.

TRAILING AN AUTO THIEF

By A CITY DETECTIVE

A FEW years ago there seemed to be a regular epidemic of a certain kind of robbery.

Ladies were stopped in open day and their diamonds torn from their ears; gentlemen were surprised in the public streets by having their valuables snatched from their hands or persons.

Most of these daring highwaymen were apprehended and punished; many of them escaped justice and are not known to this day.

It was while these robberies were becoming alarmingly bold and frequent that detective Joe Roper was called upon to investigate the affair we are about to narrate.

Richard Fairlane was the cashier of a manufacturing establishment in one of the down-town business streets.

He was young for the position, which in that particular house involved more or less responsibility—his age being twenty-three or -four, and looked even younger.

But boyish as his appearance was, his sparsely built frame had muscles like iron. He was strong-bodied, keen-eyed, clear-headed, and was besides liked by his companions and trusted unreservedly by his employers.

Young Fairlane had been sent to the bank to draw money for the paying off of some of the hands.

The amount on this occasion was considerably less than usual, and he was not accompanied by one of the other gentlemen of the office, as he was usually when this responsibility was required of him.

He drew the money, some nine hundred dollars, and started back to the building.

The money was in bank-notes in separate rolls of different denominations, and these rolls were made into a tight parcel which he had himself re-wrapped in ordinary wrapping-paper.

He had placed the parcel in an inner pocket of his coat, which with an instinct of precaution he had closely buttoned.

Of course he had no actual fear of being waylaid in the broad daylight of early afternoon, and in the busy, open street. And exercised no precaution except that of ordinary prudence.

He was whistling softly to himself as he shouldered his way through a little crowd gathered near the entrance of a popular restaurant where a noticeably fine car stood ticketed for sale.

Suddenly some person or persons jostled rudely past him.

"Beg pardon," somebody said, politely.

He had no time to observe who had spoken, for at the instant he was whirled violently to the other side.

And on the next he stumbled, and would have fallen had he not been so agile and wary as a trained athlete.

Some one had purposely tripped him.

And as he righted himself, he saw that his coat had been torn open, and that the parcel of money was gone.

It had all happened in a twinkling; and the young fellow could scarcely believe his senses when he realized he had actually been robbed.

"Where is he?—which way did he go?" he ejaculated, as he looked inquiringly at the knot of gentlemen who were surveying the car.

He asked the question in a dazed way, after a hurried glance up and down the street.

In one direction two ladies, elderly, stout, and richly dressed, were walking leisurely away; and in the other, receding at an equally unsuspicious pace, were a couple of business gentlemen whom he knew, a gray-haired woman on crutches, a boy holding a newly bought bicycle, and a harmless old fellow sandwiched between two advertising boards.

As far as any suspicious appearance was concerned, who ever had taken the parcel had disappeared as utterly as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

At his excited ejaculation, the group of gentlemen glanced at him, some indifferently, others with skeptical wonder.

They had been absorbed with their discussion of the fine auto before them, and they had seen nothing.

That was all Richard Fairlane could tell of the matter.

If his employers distrusted the story they did not say so. On the contrary, they did not even censure him for being less cautious than he should have been.

"It is what might have happened to any of us," said the member of the firm who sent for Roper to investigate the case.

There were others who did not take the same view of the affair.

Among these was one of the gentlemen who had formed the group near the restaurant entrance.

"The story is all very fine—very fine, indeed," he said to Joe. "But if I were Messrs. Silvering & Goldoll, I should look after having the keys turned on that young man, you know."

"We are having daily reports of this kind of robbery."

"An excellent cue for young Fairlane, you know—a very excellent cue!"

"Was there no jostling?—was there nothing out of the ordinary?"

"Really, I cawn't say. There was quite a crowd of us looking over the gray car. Fine machine, going for a trifle, you know."

The gentleman spoke with a strong English accent, and he was not wrong in judging him to be a Londoner.

He inferred that he had not been long in the city; that he was something of a sporting man, and that he was somehow connected with the English turf.

His name Joe did not learn until later.

But Joe could glean from him no information which had any important bearing on the case.

In fact, Joe had never undertaken a case which seemed so absolutely baffling.

In adopting the theory of young Fairlane's innocence there was nothing to work upon—no perceptible trail to follow.

All Joe could obtain of the slightest consequence was a letter which the young fellow himself had placed in his hands.

When he had been whirled about with such abrupt and unexpected violence he had struck out his right arm, partly in defense and partly to save himself from falling headlong.

His arm had been twisted backward and his hand had come in contact with something silky, like a handkerchief protruding from a pocket.

Upon this his fingers had gripped at random.

And as he steadied himself, he saw that he held not only a handkerchief, but the letter also.

With some swift instinct of sagacity he had concealed both.

The former was a square of yellow India silk, specked with dots of crimson; the latter was an epistle written in the delicate, spidery, heavily-shaded chirography of a lady.

"If you wish me to forgive past neglect—to please on your part," the lady had written—"bring me the gray car. Once in it, knowing it is your gift, I shall forget you have seemed less like my ideal of devotion than formerly. If J. J. hopes to be still my *chere ami* he will not neglect the whim of his affianced. COUNTESS CORA."

Joe had not studied over the letter very long before he arrived at the conclusion that the lover of "Countess Cora" was the person who had robbed young Fairlane.

His next conclusion was that one of the knot of gentlemen surrounding the noticeably fine automobile on the afternoon of the robbery must be an accomplished dissembler in the way of knavery.

These conclusions were strengthened by discoveries Joe made inside the restaurant.

In his tour of investigation he chanced to enter just as a pile of sweepings was being transferred to the usual ash receptacle.

A flourish of a broom and the breeze from the open door together had sent fluttering to his feet an oblong piece of thick, stone-colored wrapping paper, with a bit of red sealing-wax clinging to one roughly-edged corner.

He picked it up, and saw the broken and mutilated stamp of Silvering & Goldoll upon the wax.

"Where did it come from?" he asked the white-aproned and white-wooled old negro, who, broom in hand, stood bowing and grinning before him.

"Dunno, massa," he answered, "specs the man buying the gray car out heah dropped it at the table where he took de nip to gib him courage for de big price, suah."

"What did he look like—the man who bought the machine?" queried Joe, as he pocketed the strip of stone-colored paper, which young Fairlane had described as the wrapping he had himself put around the bank-notes.

"I dunno, sah; I nebber seed him afore, sah," said the old darky, scratching his white wool reflectively. "He cum in heah in a mighty hurry, pull de kiver you got dar off a powerful big heap ob money, and den he was out dar at de car in a wink ob de eye. Dar's nebber time to study up de looks ob a gemmen 'pearing and dis'pearing whar dar is such an revolvolating crowd, suah."

"Was he young or old?"

"Dat's where you hab got dis nig by de wool, sah. I can't tell nuffin whatever 'bout him."

With the caution of his race the old darkey had become stubbornly reticent the instant he guessed Joe had a motive in questioning him.

But Roper knew he had struck the trail at last, and that sooner or later he could put his hands upon the criminal.

Silvering and Goldoll had sent for the detective within an hour after their loss had occurred; and the discoveries just mentioned had been made the same afternoon.

Baffling as the case had been in the beginning, Joe felt that his progress was decidedly encouraging.

"And there is a possibility of your recovering a portion at least of the money," remarked the officer next day to one of the firm.

"We have changed our opinion about young Fairlane though. We have heard something of such a nature that we have felt justified in putting him under arrest. We had it from a gentleman on the spot."

In Joe's astonishment he almost sprung from the chair.

For an instant he was speechless.

Richard Fairlane under arrest!—and just at the moment when Joe was ready to prove the truth of his story!

And yet, after all young Fairlane might have gone into the restaurant and taken the wrapper from the money while indulging in a "nip," as the old darky styled it.

"Who was your informant?" inquired the detective.

"His name is Jasper Jaxon."

Again Joe started.

It seemed to him that Jasper Jaxon was not unlikely the "J. J." of the letter, and the lover of the yet unidentified "Countess Cora."

"He came in this morning with a small order for goods," the member of the firm continued. "I don't know how we came to mention the matter. But anyway, he stated what he saw very clearly. He regards young Fairlane's tale as absurd—and so it is when one comes to think of it."

"What did he see?"

"He saw nothing to corroborate any such fairy yarn. His attention was first attracted by Fairlane shouting something about robbery—he couldn't exactly make out what. There was no suspicious confusion or haste by anybody nor in any direction. The impression at the time was, he says, that the young man had been drinking, or was a little off his base."

"What sort of a looking man is this Mr. Jaxon?"

"That I don't know. His conversation was with Mr. Goldoll."

Mr. Goldoll had left the building after arranging some minor matters and had driven direct to the ferry, from where he was to start on a prolonged business tour through the West.

"Do you know where I would be apt to find this Mr. Jaxon?" queried the detective.

The senior partner shook his head.

"By the way," he said, after a pause, "he mentioned, I remember Goldoll saying, that he was the purchaser of the gray auto, and he meant to try the car in the Park this afternoon. That bit of information ought to be useful to a detective, that is if you really think we shall require him as a witness against young Fairlane."

It was not to serve as a witness against the unlucky Richard Fairlane that Joe wanted to find Jasper Jaxon.

But the bit of information was sufficient for his purpose all the same.

That afternoon he rode into the Park mounted upon the best saddle-horse he could secure from the stables in the vicinity.

He had gone early, and cantered leisurely about the main entrances, feeling pretty sure that sooner or later he should catch sight of a powerful gray car which he knew he should recognize again anywhere.

He had not long to wait.

He was less than half a block away from the most fashionable drive when a lady and gentleman drove past and into the park.

And there was the gray car; and in the seat sat a handsome woman whom Joe instantly concluded must be the mysterious "Countess Cora."

Her companion was the Londoner whom Joe had interviewed on the previous day.

But he had changed his appearance slightly—unfortunately for himself.

He had sacrificed his bushy red "mutton chops"; his face was cleanly shaven except for a neatly trimmed mustache which was dyed jet black.

As he passed the officer consulted a small photograph which he had carried for some weeks in one of his pockets.

"Great Jupiter! Why didn't I recognize the man before," as he headed his horse for a bridle path which he knew would intercept their route.

As he neared the junction of the two paths, there was a sudden startling uproar; and as Joe trotted around a curve, the scene of tumult opened before him.

The gray auto had become unmanageable; with snorting steam from its muffler, it had suddenly plunged madly away.

Two or three automobilists and a number of the mounted police had started promptly to the aid of the endangered woman, who kept bravely at the steering wheel.

But it was her companion whose daring arm and grip of steel checked the car.

Both alighted, the handsome woman trembling still with terror of the danger from which she had been saved.

Joe slipped from his saddle and stepped quickly beside him.

"Turn the car over to the mounted officer, Jerry Jason Kaine—you must come with me," Joe said, in a low voice.

The name mentioned was that of one of the most daring and notorious impostors and confidence men of the day.

As Joe spoke the name he whirled with a look the officer will never forget; fury, desperation, defiance—all were there.

In a second he had sprung back in the gray car.

"Get out of my path!" he hissed down to Joe as he turned his machine as if to bear Joe down beneath its heavy tires.

But Joe clutched the car with both hands, and a signal to the mounted officer was sufficient to spoil his little game of flight.

There is not much more to add.

It needed but little investigation to bring to light the adroit maneuver by which he had snatched the money parcel from young Fairlane's keeping.

Kaine had been in the bank when Richard drew the money, and he had followed the young man, watching his opportunity to effect the robbery. He had depended from the first on turning suspicion against the young fellow.

The "Countess Cora" was not an accomplice of his crimes. The man idolized her, but her love was an expensive luxury, and her pet whim of the gray car had sealed his fate.

They were married in prison just before his sentence—a heavy one it was, too.

Messrs. Silvering & Goldoll recovered the larger portion of the money—and Richard Fairlane, perhaps as compensation for the injustice done him, was shortly afterward admitted to membership with the firm.

In our next number we will begin a series of articles explaining the mystery of Hypnotism.

DEEP-SEA MONSTERS TO FURNISH SHOE LEATHER

ACCORDING to the trade authorities, Americans will have to pay $100,000,000 for their footwear in the course of the next twelve months.

But science has disclosed how we can get an inexhaustible supply of leather, which should reduce costs. It comes from the denizens of the deep, according to a writer in the *Illustrated World*. The skins of the shark, whale, devilfish, porpoise, blackfish and many other creatures of the ocean can now be tanned so that they will be quite equal, if not superior, to the leathers commonly manufactured from the hides of various kinds of land animals.

In the meantime the hide of the shark had been overlooked, not having been considered for a moment as stock for shoes, bags or belts, mainly because the surface of the skin was covered with a hard, pebbly coating that defied the shoemaker's tools. However, small quantities of this shagreen, as it is called, have been employed in the covering of sword hilts, and in the making of ornamental goods; also owing to its abrasive character it has been used in lieu of sandpaper or emery cloth.

Until recently no one thought of converting the skin of the dogfish, the hide of the whale or the coat of the ray into leathers that would hold their own with the best that could be produced from the hides of cattle.

A SUPERSTITIOUS SPOT

ROUMANIA, a land with which the world in general is now being brought into more intimate contact than before, must be accounted one of the favorite homes of superstition, of legend and romance. These are partly Slavonic and partly Greek and Roman, descended from the mythology of Trajan's legendaries who settled in that land between the Carpathians and the lower Danube.

These superstitions accompany life literally from the cradle to the grave. When a child is born the parents invariably turn their eyes anxiously toward the window, for just outside it are the three Uzitoare, the Parcae, or Fates, spinning the thread of the child's life, or weaving the web of its destiny. Before the child is christened it must undergo the important ceremony of its first bath. This is administered in a huge wooden bowl, called an albia or copae, which serves as bath tub and cradle both, and also, it is said, as a kneading bowl when bread is made. The bath is given at the house of the babe's godmother, whither the little one is carried, together with a gift of coffee and sugar. If it is a boy there must be poured into the bath a symbolical mixture of corn, wine and honey. If it is a girl the bath must contain feathers from the wings of a dove and petals of a rose, which serve as a prayer to the Three Spinners that her footsteps through life may be as soft as down, and her face as fair as a flower.

Ghosts are plentiful in Roumania. The Strigol are evil spirits which on St. Andrew's night make their way for mischief into every house whose doors and windows are not anointed with garlic, the scent of that plant being intolerable to the ghostly nostrils. The Moroi are the spirits of unbaptized babes, crying for their mothers' breasts and not to be appeased save by sprinkling their graves with holy water for seven years.

Finally, when man is dead, there must be placed in his coffin a comb, a bit of soap and a coin with which to pay the fee due to Charon, the ferryman of the world of shades.

THE LAST MAN

Or, The House at the End of the Block

A Serial Detective Story

By POLICE SERGEANT MALLORY

CHAPTER ONE

A MINER'S DEATH-BED—A STRANGE REQUEST—THE MYSTERY OF THE ARM.

ABOUT one hour after night-fall, upon the 21st day of January, a man might have been seen slowly descending the side of a precipitous mountain, his steps bent in the direction of a lonely miner's cabin, situated at the extreme end of Crooked Canyon Camp, Nevada.

He bore upon his back a bundle of rough, crooked sticks. They were the boughs of the pinon—almost the only tree which deigns to grow among Nevada's bleak and barren hills; they are hard to get, and harder to burn; but this man needed them, and had tramped a long distance through the snow up the mountain-side to gather them, for within that lonely cabin lay his best, if not his only, friend, in the last extremity.

He was dying. The region roundabout the hut was cold and cheerless. High, treeless mountains, white with snow, towered on every side, wild, dreary, and rugged.

Far down the canyon could be seen the shaft-houses, and huts of the group of mines which had attracted many to this cheerless spot.

It was called Crooked Canyon City. It was in reality but a collection of miserable hovels, filled with a wild, lawless gang of miners, gamblers, petty traders, and thieves.

It was to escape these persons that the owner of the little cabin had built at the head of the canyon, far above them, and out of the way.

The man with the bundle of sticks approached the hut, and throwing his burden down upon the snow, straightened himself up with a relieved air, and softly raising the latch, entered.

It was not much of a house. Only a rough miner's cabin. Built of cheap, unplaned boards, put together in the cheapest, quickest manner.

There was but a single apartment, with a rude bunk on either side, a sink in one corner, a stove in the other, and a coarse deal table in the center of the room.

There was neither carpet on the floor, curtains to the windows, nor evidences of luxury of any sort.

The owner of this cabin needed none of those things, as a glance at his pallid features as he lay stretched on one of the bunks would show.

It needed no expert physician to tell what was the matter with this man. His brow was tightly held within the grasp of the icy hand of death. The great destroyer stood present at his head, and no man could prevent the exercise of his will.

The sick man was evidently a person of refinement, and had been during his activity of great strength, as was witnessed by his powerful frame. His hair was gray and thickly matted above his brow; a long beard of the same color concealed the lower portions of his features, while his eyes, bearing in them that wild stare which foretold that life was departing, seemed of abnormal size, and were the only living feature of his countenance.

His name was Christopher Lombard; his business was that of a miner; he was, or rather had been—for he was nothing now—interested in several claims in the White Pine region.

By his side sat a younger man of strong athletic frame, dark hair, and dark eyes, holding the sick man's hand.

Apparently not more than thirty at most, from his dress and appearance it was evident that he was neither miner, gambler nor trader; nor did he apparently belong to this wild region at all.

This was a fact. The man was a stranger at Crooked Canyon—he had arrived there but two days before.

His name was Joseph Wells. He had come direct from New York to Crooked Canyon, and finding no place among the little collection of cabins there in which to stay, had been referred for shelter to this lonely hut, for Christopher Lombard lived an isolated life, and not one among his neighbors at the settlement below was aware that he was sick, far less that he was dying.

"Well, Barney," said the watcher, "did you get the wood?"

"Yes, sor!" replied the man, "plenty of good pinon, that'll kape us warm the night; lave Barney Nudd alone fer that, he'll not return empty-handed."

"Did you have far to go?"

"I did that, a good three mile an' more, for ever pinon is scarce in the mountains, and walking and climbing over the rocks an' snow makes the distance double, so it does."

"True, but I'm glad you have come at last. Bring in the wood and start up the fire, for it's getting very cold."

"I will that," replied the man; "but how is he now?"

"Very, very low. He cannot by any chance live till morning. Listen to him; hear how he raves!"

The sick man was tossing to and fro on his hard couch, muttering and talking to himself.

The man who had called himself Barney Nudd bent over him pityingly. His eyes were filled with tears.

He was only an ignorant Irish miner who had strayed out into these wilds, but his heart was as large as the heart of an ox. He loved this man who had befriended him, and would have laid down his life for him, willingly.

"Poor man, poor man," he muttered, "to die here in the wilderness with niver a priest to shrive ye, nor a candle to put at yer head. Oh, Mr. Wells, can ye do nothing for him at all, at all?"

"Nothing, Barney—his hours are numbered."

"And to think that I can't help him, and that, but for your coming in on us unbeknownst like, he'd have died with nobody but me, for divil a wan of them thaves and blacklegs down at Crooked Canyon would Barney Nudd call in, when he shunned them during his life, to see him now in death."

"Poor Barney," said the young man, pityingly; "he was a good friend to you, no doubt."

"He was that. Didn't he save me from being hung for a horse-thafe at Reno, though divil a horse did I ever steal, if them murderin' blackguards did swear the lie on me, and he's been more than a brother to me since—and now, to have him die so! Holy Mother! but it's too bad intirely, so it is."

The watcher made no reply, and the warm-hearted Irishman, without attempting to restrain his tears, brought in the sticks that he had gathered, and thrusting them into the stove, soon had a cheerful blaze.

Night had now fallen, and as a snow-storm had broken upon the Crowded Canyon with the suddenness of that region, the man tightly barred the door, and thrusting an old coat into the broken pane in the single window to keep out the wind and driving flakes of snow, lighted a candle, and placing it upon the floor out of the range of the sick man's eyes, joined the stranger, Joseph Wells, in his lonely watch.

Hour after hour passed. The patient tossed and raved and moaned.

Without, the storm howled around the lonely cabin like a band of hungry wolves seeking for their prey. Within, the candle burned lower and lower, casting the forms of Barney Nudd and his companion in long, dim shadows upon the Crowded Canyon with the suddenness of that

Neither seemed inclined to speech. They sat watching the sands of life ebb away in the powerful body before them in silence.

Suddenly a fearful gust swept down the canyon, which seemed to shake the little hut to its very foundation.

"Holy Mother!" cried Barney; "an' did ye hear that?"

Before his fellow-watcher could reply, the attention of both men was suddenly drawn to the bunk before them.

The dying man, sitting bolt upright, striving to get to the floor.

His eyes were wild, and his unkempt hair clustering around his death-white forehead gave his countenance an appearance fearful to behold.

Suddenly he sprang forward with a loud cry:

"Tanny! Tanny!" he shouted, "don't let him get it; don't, if you have any memory of my kindness to you in the past! Keep it from him, Tanny—keep it for my son!"

As these words passed his lips, and they were the first words of reason for many, many days, Christopher Lombard fell heavily to the floor.

Barney Nudd was beside him in an instant, and raising him up, placed him in his bunk with all the tenderness his sympathetic nature could show.

"Oh, Mr. Lombard!" he cried, "speak to me—speak to Barney! Oh, my God! me best friend is dead!"

Joseph Wells leaned over the prostrate form.

With the movement of an expert, he seized his hand and felt the fluttering pulse.

"Not yet, Barney," he said; "there's still life left here! Get me the whisky—quick!"

The liquor was brought, and forced between the man's pallid lips. In a few moments he heaved a deep sigh and opened his eyes.

Christopher Lombard still lived, but it needed only a glance to see that it could be for but a few moments.

The wild look, however, had left his eyes—his reason had once more returned.

"Barney!" he said, faintly.

"I'm here, Mr. Lombard. I'm here, sir!" cried the man, seizing his hand.

"Barney, I'm dying!"

Tears were the only response. Suddenly the eyes of the sick man rested upon Joseph Wells, who stood a little in the background, watching the sorrowful scene, deeply moved.

He was, as we have said, merely a chance visitor to this little hut; directed there for lodging two days before, he had never spoken with its dying occupant, as until this moment he had been incapable of uttering a coherent word.

He had pitied Barney in his sorrowful plight, and from the kindness of his heart had remained to assist him. That was all.

He did not know Christopher Lombard. He had never even heard of him before.

Yet, as would any one of sympathetic nature, he deeply pitied this strong, vigorous man as he lay before him, brought so very low.

"Who is this?" asked the patient; "what stranger have you brought here, Barney, when I asked you to let me die without interference from those ruffians at the camp?"

The younger man came forward.

"Chance brought me to your cabin, my poor friend," he said. "I am just from the East. I stayed because Barney needed my assistance."

"Your name?"

"Joseph Wells."

"Your occupation?"

The stranger hesitated.

"I do not want my business known here," he said, slowly, "but I hesitate to speak other than truthfully in the presence of a dying man—I am a private detective."

The eyes of the invalid lighted suddenly. An abnormal strength seemed to animate his frame.

"What part of the East are you from?" he asked eagerly.

"From New York."

"And you return there——"

"As soon as my work here is done—a few days at the outside."

For a moment the man seemed to hesitate; then leaning forward, he grasped the self-confessed detective by the hand.

"Mr. Wells," he said in a quick, animated, yet husky tone, for the death-rattle was even now sounding in his throat, "I have but an instant to live. Heaven has sent you to me—can you—will you—grant a strange request to a dying man?"

Joseph Wells gazed pityingly upon him.

"If in my power to do so," he replied, "I certainly will."

"God bless you for that promise—Barney, my tin box!"

Barney Nudd hurriedly opened a closet in a corner of the room, and placed in the hands of the sick man a small oblong tin box.

It was locked with a brass padlock, and seemed old, battered and stained with time.

Christopher Lombard took the box and placed it in the detective's hands.

"Joseph Wells," he said, "I have somewhere in this world a son; all that I know of him or his fate you will find fully stated in the papers contained within this box. Swear to me that you will strive to find him, and deal with him in accordance with my written request, which you will find within."

"I swear it."

"When I am dead—and I feel that it is but a question of moments—swear that you will take my body to New York, bury it in quick-lime long enough to eat the flesh from the bones, articulate my skeleton and deliver it at the place and to the person named in the papers within this box!"

Joseph Wells started back in astonishment. What strange request was this? Was the man mad? Had reason again fled from her throne?

There was no evidence of it; for, although evidently in the very last extremity, every feature of his countenance indicated that his mind was perfectly clear.

"Swear! Joseph Wells, swear! For I feel that I have but a few moments to live."

"But, my unhappy friend, what would you do?"

"The papers—they will tell—— Oh, God! My breath is leaving me! Barney! Barney! Tell him—tell him to take you to——"

The man's eyes seemed about to close, his grasp, until now firmly closed on Barney's hand, relaxed, and his head settled further back upon his pillow.

Joseph Wells stooped tenderly over him.

"Mr. Lombard!" he cried. "Mr. Lombard! Speak—tell me!"

His words seemed to call the fleeting spirit back once more.

With a mighty effort the dying miner raised himself in the rude bunk in which he lay.

Pointing one thin, white finger off into space, he cried:

"My body! My skeleton! Deliver it to Tanny! Oh, swear!"

The weirdness of the scene, the dying miner, the dim outline of the rude hut by the flickering candle, the howling of the wind without, all seemed to urge Joseph Wells on to comply with this strange request.

Seizing the hand of the dying man, he said simply:

"Joseph Lombard—I swear!"

A smile of intense satisfaction overspread the pallid features of the dying man.

The hand was lowered, the body sank back, the eyes closed, the head fell forward, and Christopher Lombard lay before the two watchers in the hut, a dead man.

The hours of the night dragged slowly by.

Barney Nudd, worn out by his long tramp and many nights of weary watching, stretched himself upon a buffalo robe by the side of the dying fire, and was soon apparently lost in a deep sleep.

Joseph Wells remained to watch the body. He sat by the table, his head resting upon his hand.

The tin box—the legacy of the dead man before him—stood upon the table upon which he leaned.

The table stood next the solitary window which in the daytime gave light and air to the hut.

The storm continued to howl without; the candle had nearly burned to its socket.

Joseph Wells had fallen asleep.

Now Barney Nudd, although worn out by fatigue, slept with one eye open.

He was like some faithful dog in this respect, and being thus half asleep, half on the watch, there came a time in the small hours of the night when he was aroused by a peculiar sound.

Sitting bolt upright upon the buffalo robe, he looked about him to see from whence the sound came.

His companion was leaning with his head on the table, fast asleep.

The corpse lay in the bunk, the candle burned dimly upon the table beside the tin box, which stood at some distance from the window, and on the side farthest away from the broken pane.

All seemed quiet and undisturbed. What had then disturbed the slumbers of Mr. Barney Nudd? Was it pure imagination?

Barney began to think so, and was just in the act of laying himself quietly down once more, when a noise at the window attracted his attention.

He gazed wonderingly at it, when suddenly the old coat which he had himself stuffed into the space once occupied by the missing pane was pushed softly inward, until it fell to the floor, and a hand was protruded through the space thus opened, which advanced slowly toward the tin box containing Christopher Lombard's last dying requests.

The hand was followed by an arm, an arm so long and thin, that to the eyes of the now frightened Barney it seemed to measure two yards in length at least.

Barney Nudd, his hair standing on end, gazed upon this mysterious arm in terror.

It seemed to wind around the table like a snake, groping for something it could not find; and stranger still, at the window Barney could see neither face nor form of any kind, only the drifting snow beyond—the arm seemed to be there alone.

Barney Nudd was too much frightened to speak—he strove to cry out, but his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

The arm continued its groping over the surface of the table; it reached the head of the sleeping detective, it seemed to toy with his hair, to feel of such of his features as were not buried in his hand.

The arm advanced—its hand had reached the tin box.

It closed upon this object with the quickness of electricity.

Barney Nudd saw the hand grasp the box, he looked steadily at it, but without seemingly having lost sight of it for one second of time, even as he looked, the arm, the hand and the tin box of the dead man in the bunk had all three disappeared.

Barney Nudd sprang to his feet. The spell was broken! He was not afraid of Satan himself now. He flung open the door of the cabin and rushed out into the night. There was no one to be seen.

The mountains were there, the canyon was there, and far in the distance the dim lights of the miners' camp could be seen, but neither under that window nor anywhere around the little cabin was there visible the faintest trace of the foot of man upon the surface of the smooth, white, newly-fallen snow.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOUSE AT THE END OF THE BLOCK.

IT was No. 99 1-2.

It was the last house in the row; it was the last row in the street; it was the house at the end of the block.

No one knew who owned it—no one could remember when it was built. It had not been occupied within the memory of the oldest inhabitant.

Had not been occupied, did I say?

Stay—I am wrong. It was occupied now. It had been occupied for many years, but by one man alone, and he was so rarely seen that it was generally supposed the house was deserted, and I for a moment foolishly allowed myself to be influenced by the general opinion.

It was not a large house; it was not a handsome house, nor did it differ materially from its fellows.

It was simply an old, red, three-story brick, with a basement beneath, and an attic with little round windows which stared down upon the passersby like great eyes from above. It did not differ, as I have said, from a hundred other houses to be found in its neighborhood—the Ninth Ward in the City of New York.

It does not matter about the name of the street; the house could not be found, if any one cared to try, for it was pulled down some time ago. We will say that it was on Jane street, not far from Abingdon Square.

The doors were always locked and barred, and the green blinds tightly closed, and the lonely occupant of the house was rarely seen either going in or coming out.

Who he was or what he was nobody in the neighborhood could tell.

He was old and deformed, and he lived there alone; and more than that not a person in the street ever knew.

His name was said to be Tanningham by some of the old women in the neighborhood, but there was no need for any one to ask it, as he always paid cash at the grocer's and butcher's, received no callers, and kept the house shut up like a grave.

The children called it haunted; and used to peer in through the basement blinds, and pretending they saw the ghost, run screaming and laughing away. Or sometimes, in the height of their fun, they would ring a peal at the front door bell in hopes to bring the mysterious old man to the surface.

It was all to no purpose.

Whether or no Mr. Tanningham, if that was really his name, had some unknown way of seeing such visitors as might be inclined to call, certain it was he never came to the door, no matter how hard any one rapped or rung.

In fact, the house and its occupant were to all the neighborhood a profound source of mystery.

Now, upon the other side of the street, and directly opposite the house which we have described, Mrs. Susan Doxey, a most respectable widow, and her daughter, a young lady of uncertain age, in order to eke out a slender income, let lodgings to single young men.

If the house at the end of the block was mysterious, Mrs. Doxey's was prosaic to the last degree.

It was simply a New York lodging house, neither better nor worse than hundreds of its kind.

Upon a warm night in June, of the summer following the events of the last chapter, a young man sat at the window of one of Mrs. Doxey's upper front rooms, smoking a long clay pipe.

He was a trim, good-looking young fellow, probably not over twenty-five.

That he was a bachelor seems a foregone conclusion, for it was well known that none but single gentlemen were allowed admittance within Mrs. Doxey's walls. That he was of a studious turn of mind was plainly evinced by the book which he held open in his lap.

The night was intensely warm, and this single young gentleman anxious to secure such snatches of cool breeze as a seat by the open window might afford, chose smoking and reading at this late hour in preference to tossing uneasily upon a bed in the terrible heat.

He was a stranger in that neighborhood; he had been but three days in the Doxey mansion; he knew nothing of the mysterious house over the way.

Had he desired knowledge of it he would not have obtained it, for every blind was shut, and the house was as dark as a tomb.

Hour after hour slipped by, and still the young man smoked and read.

Occasionally he would lay down the book, and looking from the window, glance carelessly at the passersby, but as the night advanced and the hands on the noisy little clock on the mantel neared the hour of twelve pedestrians grew less and less in number, until finally the street became deserted, the lights disappeared from the opposite windows, and the block became wrapped in the quietude of the midnight hour.

The single young gentleman closed his book and knocked the ashes from his pipe upon the window sill.

"About time for bed," he said to himself, with a stretch and a yawn, "if this terrible heat will let me sleep."

He turned out the gas, and was about to leave the window and prepare for bed, when the sound of footsteps ringing upon the pavement fell upon his ear.

With that idle curiosity which sometimes influences the best of us, the young man looked out of the window at the belated pedestrian who was approaching.

His room was now dark, and he could by the light of the gas lamp opposite see plainly up and down the street without being seen himself.

Nearer and nearer approached the footsteps, until at length the figure of a young man, or rather boy—for he could be but little more than eighteen years old—was seen approaching upon the opposite side of the way.

He was well dressed in a light summer costume, and carried in his hand a light bamboo cane.

As he came in range of Mrs. Doxey's windows his footsteps slackened, and he seemed looking up at the numbers on the doors of the houses on the opposite side of the way.

"Rather late to look up a strange place," thought the single young gentleman, as he looked out upon him.

The boy seemed to hesitate. He ran up one stoop and examined the number, then descending, he ran up another.

Evidently this was not the house he sought, for he came down again at once, and moving on again, came to a halt directly opposite the mysterious house at the end of the block.

The single young man stood watching him, wondering what he was about to do next.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Great heavens! What is this?"

Three shots rang out in quick succession in the midnight air.

The boy had fallen to the pavement without a cry, his hat flying one way, his cane another, and he lay prostrate upon the sidewalk, apparently dead.

The street was wholly deserted, save the form of the prostrate boy; no one was anywhere to be seen.

"A murder!" cried the single young man. "By all that's bad, some one has shot that boy from the window of one of these houses!"

He caught up his hat, and without a moment's hesitation dashed downstairs, out of the front door and into the street.

He could see the form of the unfortunate boy lying upon the pavement as he ran. The hands were thrown out above the head; he lay on his face as he had fallen.

The young man hurried across the street, toward the place where he lay—directly in front of the house at the end of the block.

Mrs. Doxey's lodger stooped to raise the prostrate form, when suddenly a most singular event took place, which caused him to start back in surprise and alarm.

(To be continued)

CURRENT NEWS

PUTTING AN EGG IN A BOTTLE

An egg may be put into a bottle which has a mouth much smaller than the egg, says *Popular Mechanics*. First soak the egg in vinegar until the shell becomes soft and pliable. It will then be easy to force the egg into the bottle. Pour cold water into the bottle and allow it to remain until the shell becomes hard again. The bottle can then be shown to friends, who are certain to be greatly mystified by the sight of an egg in such a place.

HAD OWN MONUMENT READY

Martin Jenners, eighty-seven, who a few years ago erected a monument for himself in a local cemetery in Indianapolis, on which was inscribed his objection to all religion, has been found asphyxiated in his room. He was the oldest native-born resident of Lafayette. The inscription reads:

"My only objection to religion is that it is not true.

"1 Cor. xv, 52; 1 S. S. xxvi., 14.

"No preaching, no praying, no psalm-singing on this lot."

CANNED MONEY

A can containing $300 in gold was uprooted from the ground by a hog on the farm of Bud Ray, near Jones' Mill, in Henry County, Tenn. Mrs. Richard Collins, a neighbor of the Rays, has laid claim to the money. Mrs. Collins says her husband once owned the farm on which the money was found, and that she loaned him the amount contained in the can shortly before his death. After his death, she says, the money could not be found, although his books contained a record reading, "Three hundred dollars canned."

TWO BIRTHDAYS ON ONE VOYAGE

W. C. Sammons, purser aboard the steamship Archer, now in port at San Francisco from the Orient, celebrated his fiftieth birthday twice on the voyage from the Far East. Sammons's birthday fell on the day that the Archer approached the 360th longitude. He was the recipient of many congratulations from passengers and crew. Then the steamer crossed the longitudinal line and the same day was repeated, giving Sammons another birthday. The Archer, operated by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, carried a $6,000,000 cargo, including $3,000,000 in silk and $1,000,000 in tea.

THE FOX CAME BACK

While guarding his chicken coop from night prowling marauders recently, William Stone, a farmer of Inez, Ky., shot and killed a fox. Upon examination Stone ascertained that the fox was formerly a pet of the Stone family but had disappeared thirty-one years ago. In 1875 the fox, then only a few months old, was captured and tamed by the family. A collar with a nickel-plated band upon which was inscribed the fox's name, Pete, was placed around its neck. Three years later it disappeared. An examination of the body showed the well worn collar and nickel band, and the name inscribed thereon could be easily distinguished.

FIRST SAVINGS BANKS

The first savings bank in America was opened in Boston 102 years ago on Dec. 13, 1818. In the same year an institution called the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society was established. The third institution of this kind in America was founded in New York in 1819. There are now over 2,000 such banks in the United States, with a total of about 12,000,000 depositors. The first regular savings bank was established in Hamburg, Germany, in 1778, and the second in Berne, Switzerland, and is now in its 115th year. The first regular savings bank in Great Britain was opened in Edinburgh 105 years ago.

MUSKRAT SKIN MONEY

Muskrat skins are the leading medium of exchange at present in The Pas, located at the frozen edge of the railroad. North of The Pas, in the Copper Lake District, Canada, gold was discovered last summer. Since then prospectors have flocked to that region, and it has been claimed that for every reputable mining company that has been organized a dozen wild-cat concerns have sprung into existence.

A local newspaper has published a formal announcement that a muskrat skin will pay for a year's subscription. The same announcement declared that mining stock "is not in the same category."

BOSTON DRY DOCK OPENED

The Commonwealth Dry Dock, largest of its type on the Atlantic Coast and capable of accommodating the largest vessel afloat, was placed in commission at Boston on Dec. 22. The battleship Virginia was selected for the distinction of being the first to test the dock, and due ceremony attended the opening, with men prominent in naval, state, city and commercial life present.

The dock cost the state $3,000,000 to construct and was recently sold with a large tract of adjoining land to the United States Government for $4,100,000. It is 1,170 feet long and 114 feet 9 inches deep. The depth over the sill at low water is 35 feet.

FIND COLOR PHOTO PROCESS

A secret emulsion, invented by a Russian professor, which, it is asserted, will make color photography possible for everybody, is about to be introduced into England. The problem of making the process capable of snapshot as well as time work is claimed to have been overcome, and the exposure can be as rapid as with the ordinary emulsion, thus fitting the invention for moving picture work also.

Special cameras and plates will be on the market shortly, and the cost of a colored film is expected to be only 15 to 20 per cent. higher than the ordinary black and white type.

A GIGANTIC BLOCK OF ICE

The largest block of ice in the world is probably the one which fills up nearly the whole of the interior of Greenland, where it has accumulated since before the dawn of history. It is believed to now form a block of about 600,000 square miles in area and averaging a mile and a half in thickness. According to these statistics, the lump of ice is larger in volume than the whole body of water in the Mediterranean, and there is enough of it to cover the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland with a layer about seven miles thick. If it were cut into two convenient slabs and built up equally upon the entire surface of Wales it would form a pile more than 120 miles high. There is enough in Greenland to bury the entire area of the United States a quarter of a mile deep.

MAKING ORNAMENTS OF BUTTERFLIES' WINGS

A Parisian jeweler is making brilliant ornaments of butterflies' wings by a process that is very simple. Each wing is mounted between two thin sheets of celluloid, cut to fit. An excellent celluloid for this purpose is a piece of used photographic film, the gelatine coating of which has been washed off in boiling water.

The wings are soaked in acetone and the celluloid is covered with it, the wings are placed between the films and put under pressure for several hours. When dry they are mounted on a pin around which colored silk is twisted to form a body.

Precautions to be taken are: Keep the celluloid away from any fire, even from a lighted cigarette; cut one piece of celluloid slightly larger than the other, fold over by pressing with a hot iron and stick down; don't let paper touch the films until these are perfectly dry.

CEBU CATTLE IN BRAZIL

Stock raisers of Rio de Janeiro are much interested in the recent report of B. H. Hunnicutt, director of the Agricultural School at Lavras, in which he advocates more attention to the importation of the cebu or hump-backed Indian cow. The great value to be obtained from such importation lies in the fact that the cebu is not subject to the attacks of the Texas tick and other fevers which cause high mortalities among other breeds of cattle in Brazil.

The first cebus to be imported into Brazil arrived here about forty years ago, and while the numbers have not been large, the extraordinary rate of reproduction has resulted in a distribution of this strain among a large percentage of the 30,000,000 cattle in Brazil. It is stated that in some instances a cebu cow has given birth to two calves in ten months and six days. In addition to their ability to withstand disease they are able to withstand to a remarkable degree the extremes of temperature that are to be found within the confines of Brazil and seem to flourish equally well in tropical or temperate climates.

SUNKEN BATTLESHIP RAISED KEEL UP

One of the finest feats of naval engineering ever accomplished is that of the raising of the Italian battleship Lenardo da Vinci, which was blown up in the harbor of Taranto on Aug. 2, 1916. She turned turtle before she sank in forty feet of water, and lay on the mud resting upon her five turrets and superstructure, her keel showing above the surface, a serious obstruction in the harbor.

Divers went down and dismounted the turrets, removed the cannon and patched the large rips torn in the hull by the explosion. Powerful pumps emptied the interior of water and compressors filled it with air. Workmen then went inside and continued the lightening. After twelve months of these labors the weight was reduced from 24,000 tons to 18,000 tons. Eight 400-ton cylinders of air were sent down and attached to the hull; these brought it to the surface, still bottom up. The strange looking vessel was towed into a dry dock, where it now rests while ship builders are effecting all necessary repairs. These finished, it will be relaunched, upside down, into water deep enough to permit it to turn over.

The work was begun by Gen. Ferrati, and, on his death, continued by Gen. Faruffini, two of the best engineers in Europe.

200 AMERICANS BUY CANADIAN FARMS

Two hundred wealthy American farmers, mostly from the corn belt of the United States, have bought 43,000 acres of land in the Snipe Lake district for $1,750,000 and will move to their farms next spring.

A Minneapolis land company inaugurated bi-monthly excursions into Canada last summer. These were the first excursions of the kind since before the war. Many of the American excursionists were impressed with the land, which produces from twenty to sixty bushels of wheat to the acre, and purchased farms at what seemed ridiculously low prices compared with valuations south of the boundary.

During a period of six weeks another land company sold $350,000 worth of farm lands in the Milestone district on the southeast of Regina and most of the purchasers were Americans.

A typical sale was that of 771 acres at $75 an acre to J. W. Tipper of Tabor, Ia., who sold his farm in that State for $400 an acre. Mr. Tipper also bought three sections of land in other districts of Saskatchewan at an average of $65 an acre.

WEAVING WICKER BY MACHINERY

One million dollars was refused by Marshall B. Lloyd of Menominee, Mich., for his new method of producing reed and fiber goods and his machine for weaving the fabrics.

A group of American men interested in the manufacture of baby carriages, furniture and baskets inspected the device in Mr. Lloyd's factory and saw, for the first time in the history of the world, so it is claimed, a machine that would weave reed and fiber. Up to the present time this costly operation has been done by hand. The Lloyd loom, however, will weave the fabric thirty times as fast as the most expert hand worker can and with far greater superiority.

A sum of $1,000,000 was made up by the manufacturers during the noon hour and offered Mr. Lloyd. He turned it down. A short while ago the Australian Government purchased rights to Mr. Lloyd's inventions for $250,000 in order to give industrial assistance to returned wounded soldiers. The sight of a one-armed man operating the machine in the Lloyd plant here convinced the Hon. G. M. S. Manifold, member of the Australian Parliament, that his country needed the machine to help out its returned and crippled heroes.

One million dollars has been raised here for the erection of a factory in Menominee in which the Lloyd method of production and loom will be used. Construction of a plant that will employ 800 men and women is now well under way. When completed it will probably be the largest baby carriage and woven furniture factory in the world.

A STRANGE FISH

The kangaroo has always seemed to have the monopoly of that convenient way of carrying its babies in a pouch, but it has been discovered that a fish has the same useful receptacle which it uses for the same purpose. The pipe-fish, as it is called from the length of its jaws, has a pocket on the under side of its body nearly half its length. It is found in the male species only, and is the only part of its body which is unprotected by large flat plates, which take the place of scales in its protective armor. If a pipe-fish is taken from the water and its little ones shaken out of the pouch back into the water they always seem either unable or disinclined to run away. But if the father is placed in the water again, all the small fish immediately swim back into the pouch. These curious little creatures have prehensile tails, which they use to hold on to the seaweed to prevent themselves being carried away by the tide. The pipe-fish is similar to the small eel, being about a foot in length and an inch in thickness, but, unlike the eel, it has a very long jaw.

MAKING ROQUEFORT CHEESE

The process of manufacture of cheese is elaborate. In the case of Roquefort, it approaches a fine art, the operation beginning by heating evening's milk to a temperature of from 140 to 150 degrees Fahrenheit, cooling it and keeping it overnight. The mixture is then "set" with rennet at a temperature of about 90 degrees. In from one to two hours after the addition of rennet the curd is cut until the particles are about the size of walnuts. The whey which rises to the surface is dipped off, and the curd is put into hoops that are about 81.2 inches in diameter and 31.2 inches in height.

The hoops are filled usually in three layers, a layer of mouldy bread crumbs being interposed between the first and second layers. The bread used for this purpose is prepared from wheat and barley flour with the addition of whey and a little vinegar. It is thoroughly baked and kept in a moist place from four to six weeks, during which time it becomes permeated with a growth of the mould referred to above. The crust is removed and the interior is crumbled very fine and sifted. The cheese is subjected to pressure, which is gradually increased, for ten to twelve hours. It is turned usually one hour after putting into hoops. At the end of a period of twelve hours it is wrapped in cloth and taken to the first curing room. The cloths are frequently changed during the ten to twelve days the cheese remains in this place.

"Formerly," to quote one of the experts, "the manufacture of the cheese up to this stage was carried on by the shepherds themselves, but in recent years centralized factories have been established and much of the milk is collected and there made into cheese. The cheese is then taken to the caves. These are for the most part natural caverns which exist in large numbers in the region of Roquefort. The temperature in these caves is 40 degrees to 45 degrees, and the air circulates very freely through them. Recently artificial caves have been constructed and used. When the cheeses reach the caves they are salted, which procedure serves to check the growth of the mould on the surface. One or two days later they are rubbed vigorously with cloths and are afterward subjected to thorough scraping with knives, a process formerly done by hand, but now much more satisfactorily and economically by machinery. The salting, scraping and brushing seem to check the development of mould on the surface. In order to favor the growth of mould in the interior, the cheese is pierced by machinery with 60 to 100 small steel needles, which process permits the free access of air. The cheese may be sold after thirty or forty days or may remain in the caves as long as five months, depending upon the degree of ripening desired. The cheese loses during ripening by scraping and evaporation as much as 25 per cent. of the original weight. The weight when ripened is about four and a half to five pounds.

HOW FAR AWAY IS THE MOON?

Everybody—at least everybody who is at all interested in the subject, and doubtless a good many people who are not particularly interested in it—everybody, we say, knows that the distance from the earth to the moon is in round numbers 218,000 miles when the moon is closest and 252,000 miles when she is farthest away. But numbers as large as this have little meaning in themselves. When we talk about one mile or two miles we have a pretty clear notion of how far such a distance is; when we get to dealing with hundreds of miles, or even with a moderate number of thousands, we can perhaps visualize such distances fairly well; but a quarter of a million is really a little too much.

If we only had some sort of a convenient yardstick to apply to such distances, it might help us a good deal to get them in our eyes and in our minds. As one part of the illustration above indicates, if the Brooklyn Bridge were to be duplicated 192,000 times in a row, the distance to the moon at her nearest would just be spanned. Of it the existing Brooklyn Bridge were to be expanded so that every inch of its length would become three miles and a half, we should again have a structure that would reach to the moon.

It has often enough been pointed out that an express train running at 60 miles per hour for 24 hours per day would require no less than five months to reach the moon. This comparison, of course, dates back to a time when the 60-mile train was the last word in earthly speed. If we bring it up to date by substituting the 150-mile airplane we may cut to a mere sixty days the time for our hypothetical journey through space to our nearest neighbor. A projectile traveling at a uniform rate of one mile per second—a speed which was approached closely enough by the German 70-mile gun to make it appear quite certain that it is practical from the artillerist's viewpoint—would reach the moon in from two and a half to three days, according to the position of our satellite with reference to the earth.

This makes the quarter million miles or thereabouts from the earth to the moon look quite respectable to our eyes, accustomed only to the distances which we can scale off here on the earth. But really, this distance, astronomically speaking, is just about as near to nothing as one could conveniently get. When we take a celestial body of decent size, such as the sun, we see this very quickly; for far from requiring that the diameter of such a body be multiplied by 30 to equal the distance which we are discussing, we actually find that the distance requires multiplication in order to equal the diameter of the sun! That is to say, the sun, which is by no means a large star as stars go, could easily contain within its boundaries the entire earth and moon and the distance between them. In fact, though our drawing is not got up so as to exhibit that feature of the case particularly, three systems like that consisting of earth and moon could be strung out in a row through the center of the sun, without coming within fifty thousand miles of his surface on either side!—*Scientific American*.

CALIFORNIA'S GIANT GRAPEVINE

Santa Barbara, in California, possesses celebrity as an old Spanish and monastic settlement, with quaint and impressive architectural relics. But many persons think chiefly of this enchanted spot, embossed like Los Angeles and San Jose in flowers during most of the year, in association with its magnificent vines. These were imported originally by the Mission Fathers from Spain, and are of the so-called mission variety.

In the Centennial year the old landmark in the Montecito Valley, the monster Santa Barbara vine, was cut down and a large portion was removed to the Philadelphia Exposition. This demolition caused widespread pangs of regret, but it soon became known that relentless age had impaired the vitality of the great vine, and that the inevitable had only been anticipated by the hand of man. No record had been kept of the time of planting, but it was generally credited that it was close on a century old. The circumference of the trunk was very nearly four feet, and the arbor was about seventy-five feet square. The decay was regarded as premature, and was alleged to be caused by the changing of the course of a small stream which had flowed near its roots. But another adjacent vine, a cutting from the original, had attained nearly the same size. Thus Santa Barbara could still boast of having the biggest grapevine on earth, until this plant also succumbed to a disease of the roots, probably resulting from age, and its body now rests in the Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce. Its irregular trunk attained a girth of four feet and a half at eighteen inches above the ground, or five feet six inches at the height of forty-two inches, and its maximum yield was the magnificent load of four tons. It was believed to be seventy-five years old.

Still, California owns the world's record vine, for in the Carpentaria Valley is flourishing a third, which surpasses both the others in size. It was planted in 1842 by Joaquina Lugo de Ayala. Important incidental associations distinguish this glorious plant. The first election in Santa Barbara County under American rule was held beneath its ample shade.

This latest candidate for the world record is double from the surface of the ground up. The two parts are knit together in a David and Jonathan like embrace to a height of five feet seven inches, where they separate into two huge branches, the largest having a circumference of three feet. Six inches above the ground the vine measures eight feet five and a half inches in circumference, and it covers an area one hundred and fifteen feet square—no fewer than sixty posts supporting the framework. The owner says that were provision made it would cover a greater surface, but it is pruned every year.

Sensational tales are told every year of the grapes this vine produces. That it did actually yield ten tons in a recent season appears to be authentic.

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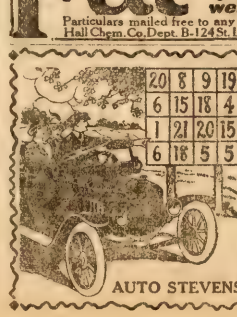

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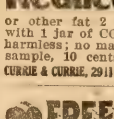

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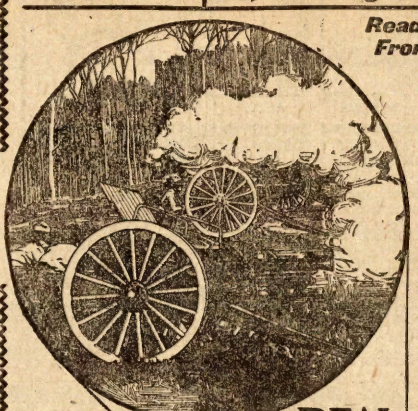

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My Moving Picture Machine is a good one and I would not give it away for $25.00. It's the best machine I ever had and I wish everybody could have one. Addie Bresky, Jeanesville, Pa. Box 34.

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I am slow about turning in my thanks to you, but my Moving Picture Machine is all right. I have had it a long time and it has not been broken yet. I have seen a $12.00 Machine but would not swap mine for it. Robert Lineberry, care of Revolution Store, Greenboro, N. C.

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